

# **Building for the Future? A comparative study of the learning experiences of three sets of learners on the Diploma in Construction and the Built Environment**

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**Declaration**

**'I, Paul Demetriou-Crane confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm this has been indicated in the thesis.'**

## **Abstract**

This study set out to map the learning path taken by a group of learners popularly known as 'NEET's (Not in Education, Employment or Training) on the first year of a Level One course. It charted their experiences through their own eyes and recorded their own perceptions and aspirations throughout their progress on the programme. Three sets of learners, numbering 36, were selected from the East London area in the UK at three different post-16 centres: a mainstream Further Education College, a private training provider and a 'virtual' Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). The programme which they undertook was the then relatively new vocational Diploma in Construction and the Built Environment which had been launched in the UK as part of a new raft of post - 14 vocational qualifications partially designed to meet the learning needs of disengaged learners. Nearly all of the learners succeeded in passing the first year of the programme. The study highlighted the significance of individualised pedagogy and the right vocational curriculum offer for these types of learners. Although the Diploma no longer exists, the study showed how the Diploma's approaches to applied and theoretical vocational learning offered distinct opportunities for learning to less motivated learners. It suggested that a focus on practical and generic learning in a real world context could provide opportunities for more innovative and holistic approaches to teaching and learning

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**Abbreviations**

AE: Alternative Education

AEI: Alternative Education Initiatives

A Levels: Advanced Levels

ALI: Adult Learning Inspectorate

AVCE: Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education

AoC: Association of colleges

BEC: Business Education Council

BTEC: Business and Technology Education Council

CBI: Confederation of British Industry

C&G: City and Guilds

CGLI: City and Guild London Institute

CPVE: Certificate for Pre-Vocational Education

CTLLS: Certificate in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector

DCFS: Department for Children, Schools and Families

DES: Department for Education and Science

DfE: Department for Education

DfES: Department for Education and Skills

DTLLS: Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector

EMA: Education Maintenance Allowance

FE: Further Education

FEDA: Further Education Development Agency

FEU: Further Education Unit

GCE: General Certificate of Education

GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education

GNVQ: General National Vocational Qualification

HNC: Higher National Certificate

IAG: Information, Advice and Guidance

ILP: Individual Learning Plan

IT: Information Technology

KBE: Knowledge-Based Economy

KS4: Key Stage Four

LA: Local Authority

LLL: Lifelong Learning

LLN: Literacy, Language and Numeracy

LSC: learning and Skills Council

LSIS: Learning and Skills Improvement Service

LSN: Learning and Skills Network

LSRN: Learning and Skills Research Network

MSC: Manpower Services Commission

NCVQ: National Council for Vocational Qualifications

NEET: Not in Education, Employment or Training

NIACE: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

NUT: National Union of Teachers

NVQ: National Vocational Qualification

OCR: Oxford, Cambridge and RSA examination board

OECD: The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OfSTED: Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

PCE: Post- Compulsory Education

PCET: Post-Compulsory Education and Training

PRU: Pupil Referral Unit

PTTLS: Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector

QCA: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

SEU: Social Exclusion Unit

The Tomlinson Report (2004): The Final Report of the Working Group on 14–19 Reform

TVEI: Technical and Vocational Employment Initiative

UCAS: The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

VET: Vocational Education and Training

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My thesis is dedicated to everyone who has been written off by the education system:

'The system's failed you, don't fail yourself' (Billy Bragg)

## **Chapter One- Introduction to the study**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This study investigates the experiences of young learners returning to post-16 study. It focuses on their paths from enrolment on the Diploma to the completion of their first year in three different post-16 centres. It seeks to identify the relationships between differences in educational practice and motivation and achievement within a vocational curriculum.

The chapter begins by explaining the rationale behind the thesis and sets out the policy and practice context of the study. This is followed by an outline of the key research questions to be answered in the study. The following sections describe the research design and methods of data collection and what the thesis hopes to achieve. The chapter concludes with a summary of the remaining chapters.

### **1.2 The rationale behind the thesis**

My interest in this area was influenced by my own educational experiences in the 1970s. I came from a socially deprived background and struggled in school because of my poor literacy and undiagnosed behavioural difficulties. My education was disrupted by expulsions from three schools. I left school with no qualifications at the age of 15 and drifted into a variety of semi-legal jobs. I shared many of the characteristics of a disaffected young person which I describe in Section 1.3. I decided to return to education part-time via adult evening classes in my early 20s. I was given a 'second chance' through post-compulsory education. This prompted me to reflect on the condition of young people today in similar situations. I decided to investigate the views, attitudes and motivations of other young people who were about to take up the challenge of returning to education.

### 1.3 Policy and practical context to the study

#### *Disaffection, Alternative Education (AE) and the vocational option*

OfSTED (2008a) defined disaffected learners as those who display one or more of the following characteristics. They are disruptive, disinterested and quiet in class, regularly in trouble in school and absent for more than 20 per cent of the year. The social and economic reasons lying behind why young learners disengage from education, according to Pemberton (2007), include poor housing, lack of educational capital, special educational needs and peer pressure. In addition, there are wider structural problems with the education system including the inflexibility of the curriculum offer, poor Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), lack of support in schools and colleges and ineffective teaching strategies. These have been described collectively as 'young people centred factors', 'system centred factors' and 'provider centred factors' (Tennard et al. 2008:19). Since 2000 a variety of formal, non-formal educational strategies and financial and work-based incentives have been put in place to combat the problems of disaffection with varying results in terms of impact.

The use of Alternative Education (AE) has been a central approach to deal with disaffection. The general role of AE is to provide for young people who have been permanently excluded from school or who have been out of school for other reasons. Alternative Education Initiatives (AEI) are the most common form of AE and cater for about two thirds of excluded young people (Kendall et al. 2003). AEIs are offered in a range of different organisations, including mainstream F.E colleges, voluntary sector providers and private companies (DCSF 2008a:14).

The government White paper, '*Back on Track*' (2008), defined the purpose of AEIs as to provide a curriculum offer that is: 'broad, relevant, links to clear outcomes and meets learners' needs' (DCFS 2008a:23). It identified as its two central themes, the early identification of problems by schools and the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning in AEI providers. More recent research has suggested that the problems still exist within AE as the quality of teaching and learning and achievements are still subject to variation (OfSTED 2009; Ogg and Kaill 2010).

Although the majority of young learners in AEI providers tended to be aged between 14 and 16 (Kendall et al. 2003), this study focussed on learners aged between 16 and 18 in AEIs because this was an age group relatively under-researched. Each of the main types of provider, FE college, voluntary sector provider and private company has been researched for this study.

The predominant curriculum offers made as AEIs have tended to be vocational (DCSF 2008a). For a variety of reasons it has long been assumed that vocational education provides the best options to re-engage those young people who are disengaged from formal education (Hodgson and Spours 2008). This has the danger of stereotyping young people, however, and creating the assumption that all disaffected learners are not capable of becoming engaged in 'academic' courses and that the vocational offer is automatically the right one for them (Gracey and Kelly 2010).

Research findings have been inconclusive about whether the vocational route is the only or best option for disaffected learners (OfSTED 2009; Hodgson and Spours 2008; Gracey and Kelly 2010 and Ogg and Kaill 2010). This study examines the latest in a line of vocational qualifications, the Diploma.

### *The role of the Diploma*

The Diploma was advertised by policymakers as a radical alternative to academic qualifications (DfES 2005a and 2007) and from 2007- 2010 this concept was a key theme in the New Labour government's publicity drive to promote it:

The Diploma is a **new** qualification for 14-19 year olds, and is set to become one of the three main learning choices alongside GCSEs, A levels and Apprenticeships. It provides a recognised and respected route into further and higher education or direct employment..... Students benefit from a course that enables you to develop a range of hands-on experience *and* intellectual skills, in a broad work-related subject context. (DfES 2007: 28)

The 14 lines of the Diploma were seen as suitable for all learners, but the sub-text of the policy statements always suggested that the Diplomas were designed to be particularly effective in engaging those learners who were 'non-academic' and disengaged from traditional education (DfES 2007).

Research has suggested that those learners who struggle with traditional mainstream academic courses could benefit from vocational learning programmes because of their emphasis on practical learning, work experience and preparation for the world of work (Golden et al. 2005; Marston-Smith et al. 2010). The benefits of these programmes also included the development of 'soft skills', such as social skills, communication and problem-solving, and significantly, an improvement in young people's attitudes to education in general (Marston-Smith et al. 2010). This seemed to be particularly true of young white working class males who form a disproportionate section of those in the NEET category (Attwood et al. 2004).

The feasibility of the Diplomas as an alternative to academic qualifications had been consistently questioned by a variety of educational stakeholders, such as UCAS, (2005), OCR, (2006), NUT (2007) and CBI (2008) and researchers, such as Hodgson and Spours (2007, 2008), have argued that it is a 'hyped up' alternative to not bringing GCSEs, A Levels and vocational qualifications into a single framework. They saw it as the latest in a line of failed 'middle track' qualifications, such as General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) and Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education (AVCEs) and argued that it carried many of its predecessors' fundamental weaknesses, such as over complexity of assessment methods and 'academic drift' (i.e. the propensity to ape academic qualifications and risking both being seen as 'second class' and losing validity in terms of assessment).

I have tracked, through their own eyes, the journey of three sets of learners who had previously struggled in mainstream education on a Foundation Level Diploma course in Construction and the Built Environment. Through this process I have explored the following questions:

- Why did the learners in this study choose the Diploma above other qualifications?
- Which teaching and learning methods did they find most appropriate and why?
- Was the type of support they received on the programme significant to their experiences on the programme?

#### **1.4 Description of the epistemology, design and methods of data collection**

The main philosophical underpinning of the study was broadly critical realist. This ontological perspective in the study made the assumption that an individual's social and economic background may affect what they do even if they do not explicitly refer to it when discussing their behaviour (Hammersley 2008). Although the study attempted to 'give voice' to a marginalised group by relying heavily upon their accounts of their experiences, it did not treat them as complete accounts of external reality nor as the primary or only realities that can be experienced. As Hammersley points out (2008: 45), 'treating reality only as what is experienced is another form of incomplete empiricism' and limited by individuals' conceptions. If this study relied solely on the respondents' accounts, this could have resulted in a distortion of reality or at least an over-simplified account. The study attempted to resolve this in two ways. Firstly, it described the perspectives of the individuals within their cultural contexts and then it located them within existing theoretical concepts to provide a framework of analysis.

The study did not seek to generate claims of general statistical significance but 'rich data' providing in-depth insights into the participants' lived experiences (Hamilton 2011). To achieve these ends, it utilised an instrumental or delimited case study approach (Stake 1994) focussing on 'an issue, problem or dilemma' (Hamilton 2011:7).

Three different institutions were used as case studies and to draw cross comparisons. The three centres featuring in the study were selected because of their differences in approach to teaching and learning. They had similar cohorts of learners and all were involved in teaching the Diploma in C&BE Foundation Level from January 2011 and January 2012.

A sample cohort of 12 learners from each centre was drawn upon. The learners were mixed in gender (although, because of the nature of the course they were mostly male), aged between 16 and 19, with 'poor' educational attainment. They were drawn from the category of learners commonly deemed as potentially Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) (LSIS 2012). A triangulation of data was



used throughout the study. At its core were interviews and group interviews, supplemented by a learners' reflective journal and classroom observations.

### **1.5 The value of the study and its contribution to professional and academic knowledge.**

I believe my study may make a variety of contributions to existing knowledge and research. Although the Diploma was discontinued by the government in 2013 as it was not cost-effective and did not cohere with its plans for vocational education, it was an important landmark in the history of vocational education. It was the last of government inspired attempts to provide a full-time alternative to academic qualifications. It was also the most recent attempt to develop a vocational qualification that was motivational for those deemed disengaged between the ages of 14-19 and that would contribute to full-time 16 -19 participation rates.

The Diploma as a programme was relatively under-researched. The most detailed studies (AoC 2009; LSIS 2012; O'Donnell et al. 2009; OfSTED 2009; Lynch et al. 2010; Macdonald Ross 2010; Baird et al. 2010 and OfSTED 2010b) had tended to focus on the Diploma in general and on the evaluation of outcomes for learners. I have evaluated the learning experiences of individual learners and the 'nuts and bolts' of their teaching and support in detail on a single programme. I have tried to show what being on a Diploma programme 'felt like' for them.

Secondly, the study will add to our understanding of how to meet the individual needs of disaffected learners in general. Finally, it will help to highlight the differences in teaching practices between a limited range of post-16 institutions and attempt to evaluate their effectiveness in reaching learners who have hitherto been alienated from traditional academic curricula by studying their delivery of the Diploma.

### **1.6 Summary of the chapters**

Chapter two discusses the definitions and the contexts for disaffection and looks at some of the main teaching and support practices that have been used in order to engage those deemed as (NEET). It also examines the debates about the use of vocational education as the answer to disaffection. Specifically, it describes the

origins and evaluates the success of the 14-19 Diploma in meeting the needs of the NEETS. The chapter goes on to outline the key themes to be explored in the study; community of learning, differentiated teaching styles and the role of learner support.

Chapter three sets out the methodological standpoint that has informed the study and seeks to demonstrate ontological and epistemological consistency. In the first half it focuses on a discussion of the merits of ethnography and the issues surrounding representation and the appropriateness of using multiple data gathering methods in the study. The final part of the chapter provides an in-depth account of the methods of investigation used, in particular, interviews, group interviews, classroom observations and learner reflective journals.

Chapter Four explains the context of the respondents' disengagement from education and the factors which influenced their decisions to enrol on the Diploma programme. The three main themes which are discussed in the first part of the chapter are disposition to learn, communities of practice and self-efficacy and how these impacted upon the attitudes and behaviour of the respondents in the study before they enrolled on the programme. The last section of the chapter explores the learners' prior understanding of the Diploma and analyses the impact that induction processes had upon their initial motivation to commence the course.

In its first section Chapter Five discusses the key problematic of vocational teaching and relates this to the experiences of the learners at the three centres. It focuses specifically on pedagogical practices in the three centres and shows how the learners responded to these and evaluates their effectiveness from the learners' points of view.

Chapter Six examines tutorial support in the three centres. It discusses the general roles of the tutor in post-16 education and, based on observation and learner feedback, evaluates the effectiveness of the three different main models of support used in the three centres - the action planning model, the learning development model and the academic learning model. The chapter concludes with three case studies of individual learners.

Chapter Seven concludes the study. In the first instance, there is a review of the research questions and the knowledge contribution made by the research. This is then followed by a discussion of the limitations of the research, implications for professional development and recommendations for future research. The concluding remarks contain a summary review of the demise of the Diploma and its validity as a means of re-engagement .

## **Chapter Two: Engaging all young people? Approaches to the vocational curriculum, policy, practices and disaffection**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In this review of extant research I discuss the Diploma in the context of vocational education in England and as a means of engaging those who have struggled in education. I show how vocational education has developed within a sea of confused policies and multiplying qualifications and discuss how the Diploma was developed in this context and the initial critical reaction to it. I analyse the debates surrounding the notion of 'disaffection' in young learners and the categorisation of NEET and highlight some of the initiatives and strategies utilised to facilitate their return to education. Finally, I pose some key questions taken from this research based on existing literature and indicate some of the directions I intend to take in my study.

### **2.1 Post-compulsory education in England- the context**

The compulsory phase of education in England lasts between the ages of five and 17. From 2015, the participation age will be raised to 18, but for all young people in the UK, there is still a de facto break at the age of 16. At this age they will either remain at a school sixth form (50% of learners), or will leave to go to a Further Education institution, a Sixth Form College, enter an apprenticeship or find employment. Almost three-quarters of 16 year-olds currently continue to participate in full-time education, and just over a quarter of these pursue Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses in Further Education (FE) colleges (DfE 2014).

From the Second World War to the 1980s direct transition from compulsory schooling to work was the norm for the majority of young people in England. The development of curriculum at upper secondary level was chequered with a mixture of 'hands off' evolution interspersed with very directive policy direction. The academic curriculum was deemed to be for 'the learned professions and higher administrative and business posts', the academic student was able to 'grasp an argument or follow a piece of reasoning', was interested in causes as well as actions and in 'how things came to be as well as how they are', and was 'sensitive to language as expression of thought' (Edwards 1997: 45). Vocational education was originally conceived as skills

training for those employed in skilled or semi-skilled roles. During the 1960s a pattern of day-release courses, complementary to apprenticeships, were established in FE colleges, encouraged by a number of the Industrial Training Boards set up under the 1964 Industrial Training Act. These qualifications were awarded by examining boards such as City & Guilds of London Institute (CGLI) in the craft construction, engineering and manufacturing industries, amongst others and concentrated on the theory underpinning trades and tended to be fairly occupationally specific (West and Steedman 2003). In the 1970s the Business Education Council and its parallel, the Technical Education Council (merged in 1983) also become responsible for part-time day release courses.

The collapse of the youth labour market in the late 1970s extended school-to-work transitions (Rikowski 2001). This led to the growth of debates around the constitution of education and the divisions between what became a more stratified academic and vocational curriculum (Bloomer 2001). The original vocational programmes were based on the premise that students would be undertaking their studies while in related work - an assumption that was becoming increasingly untrue. Consequently an emphasis upon further education providing a 'preparation for jobs' underpinned a 'new vocationalism' of the 1980s (Bates 1984 and Ranson et al. 1996).

It was the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) curriculum introduced from the early 1980s which took the first significant steps towards a preparation for work within a broader concept of vocational education. BTEC courses tended to cover rather broader vocational areas than CGLI, with explicit elements of general education and were designed around a principle of progression from secondary to sub-degree level where their Higher National Certificate (HNC) had become established for technician-level employment. BTEC also developed full-time courses on the same pattern, classified as Diplomas, rather than the part-time Certificates.

The development of the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) (1982) as an enhancement curriculum, promoting science, technology and IT and the cross-curricular and core skills, together with modular courses, such as the Certificate of

Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) in 1985, was further evidence of a general shift towards a broader, re-focused vocationalism in the upper secondary curriculum. The development of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) followed a review of vocational qualifications (Green 1991). NVQs became available as full-time and part-time courses in further education colleges, as well as being used as a means of assessing skills in the workplace. Their underlying philosophy of learning, based on standards of performance (outcomes) and an assessment regime typically consisting of observations and recording of performance at work or simulations of it, became a template for subsequent vocational qualifications development and the Diploma (Bloomer 2001).

## **2.2 Definitions of vocational education**

John Dewey (1918) had a broad conception of vocational education as a process which seeks to breakdown the false dualisms of 'labour and leisure, theory and practice, body and mind'(p. 307) so as to 'acknowledge the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation'(p. 318).

He argued that the early twentieth century system of industrial education was designed merely to prepare working class children for manual labour in which they had no stake and which perpetuated the divisions in society. He conceived the real role of industrial education as one of preparing them for work that was personally rewarding and serviceable to society. With the home receding in importance, the school became a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart to learn lessons. His conception of vocational education differed from either job training or education for culture (1918). He argued that a course of study that emphasised the scientific and social values of work would combine the best aspects of education for work and leisure, preparing students from all social classes to participate in democratic life as equal citizens.

To Dewey, the purpose of education was to prepare citizens for vocations, cultivating along the way the ethical individualism and democratic habits required in a modern industrial democracy.

According to him a vocation was more than a job or occupation. It was 'a gift and a duty, giving meaning to every part of one's identity and making one a more developed human being' (Dewey 1921: 147). It was the activity in which people recognised their lives as truly their own, providing a sense of ownership over one's work and an organising principle for self- knowledge and self-development. Dewey called a vocation a rough sketch map that would direct further activities. Thus a vocation opened new paths of understanding, giving workers new ways of looking at themselves and at the world.

Dewey's notions of the social functions and moral purposes of vocational education have been developed in the work of Christopher Winch (1995, 1998, 2000 and 2003). Winch saw the fundamental role of education as preparation for life. Winch argued that education has a conservative function, the preservation of general knowledge, skills, values and social and cultural relationships which he deemed human, social, moral, material and intellectual capital (Winch 1998). Central was the moral purpose of education, moral lessons such as knowing the limits of one's self, an awareness of the importance of others in terms of feelings, needs and motives.

Akin to Dewey, Winch argued that moral education was an essential part of education as it helped the development of character traits, which contributed to the individual and society in general. Moral education involved the recognition and adaptation to the requirements of others and the community as a whole. It was connected with the satisfaction of intrinsic social good, values like trust, sociability, self-regarding, persistence, reliability, and motivation to overcome obstacles (2000).

He was interested in the way that moral education was developed through the social demands and relationships that arise in the workplace and argued that the workplace is an important site of moral formation and a potential source of intrinsic satisfaction and self-fulfilment for the worker, in some respects as important as the domestic and leisure spheres of life.

He was critical of the notion of vocational education as training. He conceived of vocational education as formational and developed its affinities with liberal conceptions of education. Drawing from Dewey's arguments, Winch suggested that

vocational training needs to be part of a process of socialisation into work-related values in a community of work where skills like the ability to deal with stress and co-operation with fellow workers were highly regarded.

A strong VET programme, therefore, involves: building on school-based education; the acquisition of a range of knowledge and abilities that are transferable within an occupation or industry, together with inculcation into the aims, history and values associated with that skill area or industry (2000). Good vocational education requires relatively high levels of numeracy and literacy, together with a continuing disposition to learn. In essence, this form of vocational education could justifiably be described as: 'liberal in orientation' for the following reasons: it incorporates the elements of traditional liberal education (e.g. English and Maths); it is concerned with personal fulfilment; it encourages autonomy through the promotion of independence and qualities such as persistence, self-discipline, the pursuit of excellence and co-operation (Winch 1998: 377).

He discussed the relationship between vocational education and the labour market, paying attention to the moral implications of preparing individuals for seeking employment (2003). Like Dewey he recognised that policies for schooling, for vocational education and for economic development are interdependent, since the economic demand for skills has implications for the supply of those skills and their prerequisites. In his work he painted a picture of policy confusion and a Britain where skills remain job - or firm-specific and difficult to transfer, unlike those countries with a broad-based initial programme of skill formation (2003).

He concluded that the long-term focus of vocational education must be on the development of mental and manual skills and on work-related values developed through a culture or community of practice. This would have an impact on the development of a 'good society' which:

Most would agree is one which is not only well-off but populated by people who value and possess to some degree, virtues they believe are constitutive of good people (Winch 1998: 238).



Michael Young has approached the issue of vocational education with a focus on content and specifically to investigate the question as to what knowledge those on VET programmes should acquire (1998, 2008, 2009, 2011 and 2012). He has tried to demonstrate that in policy-makers' attempts to develop a distinct vocational curriculum, each approach avoids the issue of how vocational knowledge can be distinguished from school or academic knowledge, on the one hand, and from the skills and knowledge that can be acquired in the course of work on the other.

Young argued that the vocational curriculum always had two purposes: providing access to the (disciplinary) knowledge that is transforming work and acquiring job-specific skills and knowledge. The former purpose relies on context-independent knowledge, whereas the latter will be context-specific and related to specific sectors and workplaces. In pedagogic terms these processes would demand what he called 'dual recontextualisation' (2008).

Key to these purposes was the importance of combining the demands of the occupational sector and the intellectual development of the learner. In essence, the balancing and bringing together of conceptual and contextual coherence was critical to the success of a future vocational curriculum (2011). In his conception there are two types of 'coherence' - 'conceptual' and 'contextual'. Conceptual coherence is defined by access to discipline-based knowledge, and contextual coherence by access to the skills associated with particular occupations and workplaces. An ideal curriculum that has overall coherence needs to be based on both types, although the balance between them will vary in different pathways (2008).

Drawing upon Dewey's ideas, he suggested that a reliable model for the vocational curriculum had to embrace content, concepts and skills. Content was seen to be the carrier of concepts as through them learners could gain access to concepts and new ways of thinking (2008). It was the inter-relatedness of concepts in a subject or a discipline that distinguished them from the everyday concepts that pupils bring to school, and which offers them ways of going beyond their experience.

Young argued that a strong vocational curriculum should stipulate the concepts associated with different subjects and these must be linked to the contents that give

them meaning and to the skills involved in acquiring them. It should aim at a new balance between the stability of concepts (expressed in subjects), and changes in content and skills (2012).

Ultimately, according to Young, the role of specialised educational institutions should be to conserve and transmit 'Powerful Knowledge' (PK) that is the formal education that had been discovered by previous generations. An idealised future curriculum would emphasise access to PK as the driver of it (2008). Young argued that PK has the following characteristics. It provides reliable and 'testable' explanations or ways of thinking and is the basis for suggesting realistic alternatives. It enables those who acquire it to see beyond their everyday experience and is conceptual as well as based on evidence and experience. It is always open to challenge and is acquired in specialist educational institutions, staffed by specialists. It is organised into knowledge domains with well-defined boundaries and strong specialised identities. It is conceptual but draws upon the distinction between the theoretical and the everyday or common sense (2009).

Young believed that PK was acquired and developed when pupils were able to move between their everyday concepts and the theoretical concepts that are located in school subjects. It was this access to knowledge that would help to enable them to understand the world. Hence the purpose of this knowledge was to:

..ensure that as many as possible from each cohort or age group are able to acquire the knowledge which takes them beyond their experiences and which they would be unlikely to have access to at home or in the community (2010: 6)

As suggested in the Wolf Report (2011) there is no current formal definition of vocational education in England. I tend to believe the term is applied to a highly diversified and disjointed market in courses loosely connected to employability that range from specialised apprenticeships to lower level courses designed to meet the needs of learners excluded from mainstream education. Many share some of the features of the idealised models of VET theorised in the work of Young (2010) and Winch (1998) such as the blending mental and manual skills, the embedding of essential skills and the development of work-related values. I am uncertain whether VET should be conceived as a separate entity at all and not simply part of a

coordinated, comprehensive qualifications framework that encompasses all post-14 education as argued by Hodgson and Spours (2008).

### **2.3 Turbulence and vocational education**

According to Simmons and Thompson (2008) FE currently has been driven away from its original purposes. Its turbulent history has resulted in a very wide range of courses, awards, institutions and importantly, different rationales for vocational education. 'What is noticeable is that each initiative, while purporting to supplant and rationalize the previous 'jungle' has in fact tended to add to it' (Simmons and Thompson 2008: 61). As a consequence of this fragmentation of qualifications, which also include 14-16 vocational routes, it is easy for young people to enter the wrong one, not just in terms of the occupation in question, but also in terms of level of difficulty and style of learning.

West and Steedman (2003) listed a series of fundamental flaws with vocational education that included: attempting to promote vocational education as having a distinct identity and substantial pathway at the same time as seeing it as a 'mix and match' facility interlinked with academic options; few well laid out progression routes between full-time vocational education and, on the one hand, apprenticeships and, on the other, higher education; a large number of vocational education qualifications with little articulation between them.

However, in more recent years, the provision of a 'vocational education' has come to be recognised as a more complex matter than that of simply training students in job-specific skills. Within the context of Post-Fordist and other analyses of current and prospective transformations in Western societies, the global emphasis has been a requirement for some form of 'flexible' knowledge worker within collaborative, high trust, high-skill work relations (Bloomer 2001).

Hence, many of the reforms to have taken place in post-16 education since the early 1980s, despite the shifts in policy and piecemeal fragmentation of approaches, reflect a clear and visible attempt to shift from a narrowly focused 'preparation for work' towards some notion of preparation 'for life', 'for citizenship', 'for multi-skilled work' and 'for collaborative work relationships' (Bloomer 2001: 431).

The term VET is contested. The 'vocational education' dimension is emphasised by those who contend VET is (or should be) based on transferable work and life skills. The 'training' dimension tends to be emphasised by those who believe that VET should address itself exclusively to the acquisition of a relatively narrow set of job related skills or competencies (Huddleston and Unwin 2002).

Bloomer (2001) argued that the once clear purpose of vocational training has become extended and blurred into a hydra-like framework of 'Vocational Education and Training' (VET) based in some broader concepts of vocation and preparation and 'occupational training' whose primary concern is to equip learners with skills for jobs. He suggested that the new knowledge base evolved into a softening of subject demarcations to enable learners to work confidently and creatively as 'knowledge retrievers' and 'knowledge creators' who know how to learn, 'in order that new knowledge can be assimilated, reformulated, applied and evaluated speedily and effectively without dependence upon instruction' (2001:428). James et al. (2013) suggested that this desire to develop a Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE) in response to economic globalisation and the transfer of manufacturing jobs to lower cost countries has led to an obsession with formal qualifications and training to the neglect of the wider context:

Rather, the critical issue is the extent to which production is organised and supported within firms and regions to facilitate individual and collective learning and, in the process, pave the way for innovation (James et al. 2013: 74)

Unwin (2004) also bemoans the decline of once respected vocational qualifications and the lack of robust technical qualifications in the UK system:

The final nails in the coffin of vocational language could be said to be 'enterprise education', 'competence-based qualifications', and 'key skills'. Like an over-priced cocktail, these concepts are adorned with fancy rhetorical umbrellas and curly straws but their content leaves a lot to be desired (2004: 77)

She suggests that VET should be redefined to embrace its social, cultural and economic relevance and provide people with the opportunity to study topics which have links to both practical skill and aesthetic appreciation. This view is supported

by Lucas et al. (2010) who argue that the aims of vocational education should be seen in terms of behavioural, cognitive and affective development, the 'working competencies' which include: routine expertise; having the knowledge and aptitude to stop and think effectively when required; functional literacies; craftsmanship; business-like attitudes and wider skills for personal growth towards independence as a learner (2010:18).

Other critics have specifically problematised the concept of vocational education per se as a viable alternative to traditional academic programmes and a means of re-engaging young learners, and of providing opportunities to progress.

Edwards et al.'s (1997) study of the academic/vocational divide drew a series of interesting conclusions about the differences and the similarities in curriculum content, structure, organisation and pedagogy between different advanced courses. Some of the main findings are outlined below.

#### Vocational qualifications

The writers claimed that vocational qualifications were provided largely for those regarded as being less able, as needing to be motivated by seeing direct connections between what they are learning now and their future employment. It was also the route for those judged to be unsuitable by their teachers or who deemed themselves unsuited for advanced academic study (1997).

#### Vocational knowledge

According to Edwards and colleagues vocational qualifications represent useful, specialised, knowledge and skills selected by learners primarily because of their presumed relevance as preparation for employment within a particular vocational field. Their usefulness is intended to be obvious to students who want to see fairly direct and fairly immediate application of what they are learning to the 'real world', in particular the 'world of work'.

### The vocational learning experience

The researchers suggested that vocational courses like BTECs and GNVQs provided a different kind of learning experience because their origins were premised on a form of flexible learning which specified only outcomes and not content or process (1997). Although this flexibility has been criticised, I suggest later that this flexibility in purpose and structure was a key strength for the Diploma in C&BE.

### The learners

The researchers found that the learners on GNVQs differed from those on Advanced Level courses in different ways. They had lower grades, had parents from lower status occupations, more than likely had already undertaken a vocational course, had a slightly older average age and had been directed towards the vocational route in IAG sessions. There were also differences in terms of attitudes as the vocational learners tended to prefer more 'interactive learning', coursework assessments rather than examinations and more concrete real world teaching (1997). I will discuss in Chapter Four to what extent these were echoed by my own respondents.

### Learners' learning experiences

The researchers focussed their classroom observations on the learners' learning experiences. They noted that the vocational classes contained more and longer activities than the A Level classes. They suggested that the vocational classes were mainly more interactive than the academic sessions involving more IT (computers); using teacher-prepared handouts, working in pairs or small groups; working on assignments by making notes and preparing reports; engaging in discussion — either as a class or as a group; researching individual aspects of the prescribed unit; and overall, learners were given more autonomy and time to work on assignments with the support of the teacher (1997).

They observed that classroom activities in GNVQ classes were heavily skewed towards the preparation and production of assignments and the weight given to students' portfolios meant that they were socialised early and thoroughly into the 'workplace' activities demanded by projects. Paradoxically, whilst GNVQ students enjoyed more control over the processes of learning than the learners on A Level courses, they seemed to have fewer opportunities to take any responsibility for their

content (1997). These are areas which will be analysed in more detail in Chapter Five.

As part of their research with the *Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education* (TLC), within the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Research Programme, Colley et al.'s work (2003) highlighted also both what students learn on VET programmes and how they learn. They sought to investigate not only how to transform learning cultures but also how learning cultures transform learners. They placed centrally the social, cultural and emotional aspects of learning and demonstrated how learning was a process of becoming as part of participation in communities of practice.

Their work drew heavily upon Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' to demonstrate how young people's dispositions (social and family backgrounds, individual preferences and life experiences) predisposed them to orient as part of their vocational learning towards a 'vocational habitus'. This was actively co-constructed by teachers and students and determined in part by the vocational discourses of particular employment sectors and particular occupational levels within those sectors and the capitalist power relations which have become normalized in lifelong learning.

In her study of 32 Level One learners, Atkins (2008) suggested that young learners in the NEET category also have a series of social, educational and economic barriers to overcome which circumscribe their life-chances:

Thus, in respect of developing learning identities and negotiating successful transitions to the world of work, these young people are constrained by multiple barriers and however well motivated, or determined to 'transform the habitus' the options available to them are very limited (2008: 14).

The Wolf Report (2011), too, cast significant doubt over the current provision of vocational education in the UK claiming that young people were being 'short changed' by the system. Specifically, the report claimed that there is a mismatch between vocational education and the needs of the labour market in key areas. It argued that:

- many vocational qualifications have no real value in the labour market
- many young people are encouraged to take vocational qualifications at age 14-16 which block their progression to other post-16 options simply to benefit schools' league table statistics or funding requirements
- there are high drop-out rates and 'churning'-moving between qualifications- amongst 16-18 year olds trying to find appropriate educational pathways
- the provision for English and Maths courses is weak for post-16s who have struggled in education (2011: 45).

The Wolf Report suggested that at least 20 per cent of young people aged between 16 and 18 are currently being failed by the education system and those who leave Key Stage 4 (KS4) without GCSEs fare particularly badly as they struggle to get onto high quality Level 2 courses. Consequently, they are most likely to end up on courses which have no real value or to become unemployed.

The report was particularly sceptical of the way that many learners are pushed onto programmes which are quasi-vocational and quasi-academic. (One of the case studies used in the report mentions how the Diploma in ICT is being delivered in a way that fits this description.) The report suggested that only 20 per cent of the 14-16 curriculum should be available for vocational study (2011: 67).

It also recommended that more flexible and more diverse qualifications tailored to local market needs should be developed for those young people aged between 16 and 18.

A report by Birdwell et al. (2011) was also unconvinced about the success of vocational education in general. They argued that there are various key problems that characterise vocational education in the UK. These include: too many confusing vocational qualifications; poor links between different types of qualification; many qualifications that employers do not value and high levels of non-achievement and non-completion of qualifications. They claimed that since the 1980s government



intervention had tended to focus on developing new high quality vocational qualifications with distinct progression routes but despite this:

There is still a bewildering array of vocational qualifications and comparability remains a concern. History tells us that it is the trusted qualifications with a historical brand and independent assessment and standards' boards that have traction with individuals and employers alike. Government backed and produced NVQs often have little value and in some cases have become badges signalling low aspirations and low earnings (2011: 78).

They suggested that the previous Labour government's approach, post-Leitch, attempted to combine a traditional supply-side with a stronger demand-led approach to vocational education in order to rationalise the system based on a framework of national targets but that the impact on those 10 per cent of young people deemed as NEET was negligible:

this target-driven approach did nothing for those young people most at risk of becoming NEET, who were pushed on to vocational courses more for the sake of achieving national targets rather than developing their own talents. This is unfortunate, since those most at risk of unemployment were pushed into gaining qualifications that were sometimes more likely to make them unemployed(2011: 83).

## **2.4 The Diploma**

In my study I intend to concentrate on one particular vocational course - the Diploma in Construction and the Built Environment (C&BE). The C&BE Diploma was selected for several reasons. Firstly, it was one of the first five lines of Diplomas along with IT; Society, Health and Development; Engineering; and Creative and Media, that were launched in September 2008. Secondly, the target market of the C&BE Diploma along with the Engineering Diploma most closely matched my research interest group, i.e. those who are deemed or deem themselves as 'hands-on' learners. The C&BE was chosen instead of the Diploma in Engineering because its take up rate was better in my research area of East London. I chose the Foundation Level because this was the only level that would be available to learners who had not succeeded at school in their Key Stage Four (KS4) examinations. According to Spielhofer et al. (2008) it was also the most popular amongst 'disengaged' young learners.

I was also interested to see to what extent the Diploma incorporated in practice some of the features of an idealised vocational curriculum as discussed in the works of Dewey, Winch and Young such as: a flexible inter-related structure; the embedding of traditional liberal education elements; contextual/coherence; Powerful Knowledge; combining theoretical, stimulatory and practical elements and the development of social attitudes and values.

The Diploma is the latest chapter in a history of 14-19 policy which has appeared and re-appeared like Banquo's ghost over the past 20 years in a variety of definitions and forms. Arguably, it can be traced back to the piloting of the Technical and Vocational Employment Initiative (TVEI) in 1983 and via a variety of policy initiatives in the first term of the Blair government, vocational alternatives to academic qualifications, reviews, and apprenticeship reforms to the announcement of 14-19 Diplomas in 2005 (Pring et al. 2009).

It was originally launched by Ruth Kelly, the Secretary of State for Education, in the Government's official response to the Tomlinson Final Report, *The White Paper 14-19 Education and Skills* (DfES 2005b). The White Paper argued that the education system was hamstrung by indifferent vocational provision and weak basic skills. Its solution was to reject the main Tomlinson recommendation (2004) for a unified multi-level diploma system to replace all existing qualifications for 14-19 year olds from Entry to advanced level. Instead, it proposed to retain GCSEs and A levels and to set up 14 lines of 'Specialised Diplomas' to provide an alternative ladder of progression of broad vocational qualifications for young people: 'The new qualifications formed the centre-piece of the first ever statutory 14-19 National Entitlement for learners, aimed at providing both breadth and choice of study and institutional setting' (Hodgson and Spours 2008: 64).

The White Paper painted a glorious picture of an education system of the future that:

should provide every young person with a route to success in life through hard work and dedication. To do so, it must provide opportunities that stretch and motivate each young person; interesting opportunities to learn in a variety of different ways, abstract and practical and rigorous

qualifications with currency in the worlds of work and of higher education, both here and abroad (DFES 2005a :21).

In a chapter entitled *Engaging all Young People*, it stated that it was imperative to recognise and address the needs of three particular categories of NEET: those who drop out partly because they are not being motivated by an academic curriculum and qualifications or whose learning styles are not being met; those with particular personal and social problems; and those with designated learning difficulties.

It specified a programme of strategies for helping those who struggled in mainstream education claiming that:

this White Paper introduces new opportunities for young people to enjoy new styles of learning and to learn in a different setting. There will be more opportunities for practical, applied learning. There will be more opportunities to learn in a different, often more adult, and environment – including the potential for a significant experience of the workplace (DFES 2005a: 66).

The centre piece of their basket of proposals was the Level One Diploma which would provide a ‘wholly new opportunity for young people to take qualifications at which they can succeed and which then prepare them to progress to the next level’(DFES 2005b: 68).

The Department for Education and Skills’ *Implementation Plan* (DfES, 2005c), published ten months later, introduced the new programme of Diplomas. In March 2007, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) announced that up to 40,000 Diploma places would be available from September 2008 (although no target numbers were set). Subsequently, the DCSF announced that around 20,000 learners were expected to take Diplomas in the first phase of Diploma delivery, although figures, released by DCSF in October 2009, indicated that approximately 22,000 young people had commenced Diploma courses (Lynch at al. 2010).

The Diplomas were originally offered at three levels (excluding entry level) and across 17 lines of learning, and were to be implemented in four phases. For each phase of implementation, consortia (of schools, colleges, training providers,

employers and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) had to submit an application to the DCSF for each line of learning they wanted to offer.

The first five lines of learning were introduced in September 2008 (Phase 1) by consortia approved to offer Diploma courses. These were Construction and the Built Environment, Engineering, Information Technology, Creative and Media, and Society, Health and Development. A further five lines were available from September 2009 (Phase 2) in Business, Administration and Finance, Hair and Beauty Studies, Hospitality, Environmental and Land based Studies, and Manufacturing and Product Design. Four more lines were launched in 2010 (Phase 3) in Public Services, Retail Business, Sport and Active Leisure, and Travel and Tourism. In October 2007, the Secretary of State announced that a further three new Diploma lines in Science, Languages and Humanities would be added from 2011 (Phase 4,) but these were abandoned by the new government in 2010.

The Diploma consisted of three main components:

**Principal learning**: the sector-related knowledge and underpinning skills needed to progress in relevant sectors.

**Generic learning**: functional skills in English, Mathematics and ICT, development of personal, learning and thinking skills, and a Project or Extended Project.

**Additional/specialist learning**: a selection of options could be chosen from a specified range of qualifications to add breadth to the programme of learning or specialist options in order to add depth to the line of learning.

Diplomas also included learning in the workplace (a minimum of ten days' work experience), and learning through realistic work environments, to enable the development of practical skills and work-related application of learning.

## **2.5 Evaluation of the Diploma**

In their study of the preparations for the launching of the new Diploma in pilot consortia, O'Donnell et al. (2007) reported that the new Diploma qualification was

welcomed overall, particularly because of the varied learning experience and transferable skills learners would gain. They said that the consortia researched were keen to deliver this new course and felt that they would be prepared for Diploma delivery by September 2008.

In around half of the sites visited by the research team, curriculum planning for principal learning in the Diplomas was good, with a strong collaborative element. However, there were some examples of variation in the quality of curriculum planning between different Diploma lines within the same consortium (2007: 67).

In some areas of teaching such as: leadership and management; functional skills; understanding the combinations of additional and specialist learning; assessment and practical teaching approaches, it was felt by some respondents that additional support was required for some staff (2007: 75).

According to the report on the first year of the Diploma by Lynch et al. (2010), the Diploma was welcomed overall, particularly because of the varied learning experience and transferable skills learners gained. There were, however, some issues raised about a misconception amongst learners and parents that the Diploma would involve more practical learning than it would in reality, creating uncertainty about whether the expected practical focus would materialise.

This was especially true of the Construction and the Built Environment Diploma and the Engineering Diploma where some learners, and their parents, also had the same misconception. This was partially caused by the title of the Diploma which it was felt implied a greater focus on practical work than was actually present in the content of the syllabus.

The report raised some concerns about the issue of the balance between breadth and depth, i.e. whether the Diploma should offer a learner a broad but rudimentary range of skills and experiences relating to a range of different topic areas, which may be a barrier to employment or progression, or whether it should be focussed on a selected number of topics, but in more depth, allowing learners to gain a true understanding and develop a particular specialism (2010: 30).

Some of these issues were raised in the 2009 OfSTED report which suggested that students in almost all the consortia visited were very motivated by the applied nature of their learning and the opportunity to work in realistic vocational contexts: 'However, most of them did not fully appreciate the composite nature of the qualification, or how the other elements linked to their principal learning' (OfSTED 2009: 68).

The embedding and wedding of theory and practice continued to be an issue in the pilot stage of the programme. This was clear in the case of those students on the C&BE Diploma where over half the students interviewed were less enthusiastic about the theoretical aspects of the Diploma and failed to see their relevance in relation to the practical work or, more generally, to their perceptions of the Diploma. In the theory lessons observed, teachers were not as good at motivating students or keeping their interest:

Theory lessons often lacked pace, were not effectively planned and were too centred on the teacher. Many lessons failed to cover the Diploma requirements in sufficient detail or were not made sufficiently relevant to practical construction activity. In the least effective lessons, teaching was dull and uninspiring (2009: 29).

OfSTED were particularly scathing about the teaching of theory sessions. They claimed that in almost all of the theory lessons observed, teaching was teacher-led, with little attempt made to meet individual needs and focused on one topic in isolation from related topics in other units, making it difficult for students to understand the relevance or context of what was being taught. Some of the consortia observed tended to neglect the teaching of theory completely: 'In three of the consortia visited, too much curriculum time was allocated to the practical unit activities within the Diploma' (OfSTED 2009:34). Therefore, the teaching of theory became, to some extent, sacrificed to the teaching of the practical sides of the programme (OfSTED 2009).

Interestingly enough, staff lack of expertise to teach certain elements of the Diploma was a major concern raised in O'Donnell et al.s' report of 2007. This was once again a question raised about the Diploma in C&BE in 2009. Some teaching staff feared that recruiting experienced staff with the broader knowledge and skills to teach the

practical elements of the C&BE Diploma might be problematic as they could earn more money outside teaching. This perceived shortage of specialist staff did not seem to impact on learning when the Diploma was launched, however, OfSTED inspectors were broadly positive about the teaching and learning which took place within the principal learning:

Students in almost all of the consortia visited were well motivated by the applied nature of their learning in the different Diplomas. They mostly found the tasks and assignments interesting and, for example in engineering and creative and media, appreciated the opportunity to work with specialised equipment (OfSTED 2009: 35).

The positive consequences of this were that since the students enjoyed and were challenged by much of the work, their behaviour was good and their attendance was often higher than that of other students in their year groups. Students felt they were being treated like adults because they were given more of a responsibility for their own learning and allowed a freer choice over their options (2009: 30). According to the 2009 OfSTED report the large majority of the students interviewed were positive about the Diploma and especially the practical activities they had completed. The inspectors claimed they saw a high standard of practical work undertaken by motivated and engaged learners.

The assessment of functional skills was also problematic in the first year of the Diploma. OfSTED (2009) reported that achievement in functional skills was patchy, and many students did not understand, at that stage, that these skills formed an integral part of the Diploma.

According to OfSTED (2009) the teaching of functional skills varied within and between consortia:

The best lessons were very well planned, conducted at a good pace and with a wide range of activities. Students improved their functional skills and learned how to use them in other parts of their courses. In the less successful lessons, the approach was too theoretical and allowed insufficient application of the skills(2009: 47).

The quality of the learning experience in functional skills also varied according to the report. In contrast to much of the principal learning, functional skills tended to be taught in the home institution, without much support from the other centres. As a result, students on the same Diploma course could have significantly different learning experiences. This was partly the result of a lack of collaboration amongst teachers of functional skills and an un-systematic approach to the embedding of functional skills into principal learning (OfSTED 2009).

Baird et al. (2010) were cautiously optimistic that the reforms were seen as offering 14-19 students a broader range of curriculum options, including more coherent vocational routes, which would lead to a more personalised offer for students. Some centres were cautious and preferred to stay with more established vocational and academic qualifications. Some centres that had adopted Diplomas had seen a change in the engagement of their students.

Based on their comments from their research respondents, they expressed doubts over the following areas. Many of which echoed the problems highlighted in the OfSTED report (2009):

- The breadth of the curriculum
- Resource demands in terms of planning time and organisation
- Its initial low recruitment
- The timetabling logistics
- Its assessment – particularly the status of Functional Skills
- Its viability in a crowded market of other vocational qualifications such as BTECs
- Its future in the context of a change of government and consequently,
- Its future funding (Baird et al. 2010)

Many of these issues contributed to the ultimate demise of the Diplomas in 2013. The initial take-up of the Diploma proved well below original expectations. In the first two cohorts (2008 and 2009) official figures put the total number of participants at some 37,500, compared with the original target of 150,000 (Lynch et al. 2010).



## 2.6 Disaffection and young learners

### Defining Disaffection

There are considerable difficulties in defining disaffection because researchers have employed numerous terms to define a cluster of behaviours, attitudes and experiences that could be covered by this overarching term. Labels include, at-risk, disenfranchised, marginalised, excluded, underserved, troubled, alienated, disempowered and, perhaps most commonly at present, '*disengaged*' (Steer, 2000). Other researchers have also pointed to the complex, multi-causal, and often highly individualised nature of disaffection, and have highlighted the need not only to focus upon the diverse behaviours and attitudes themselves but also the varying levels at which they are exhibited. Heathcote-Elliott and Walters (2000), for example, have conceptualised a 'continuum of disaffection' reflecting levels varying between active and passive and mild and severe. One feature common to all reports on the subject is that being labelled disaffected has negative connotations for the individual (Heathcote-Elliott and Walters, 2000:1). It has also been argued that, adolescence itself can also be perceived as a time of 'natural' disaffection in which young people are susceptible to crises, conflict and stress as they make the complex transition from childhood to adulthood (Heathcote-Elliott and Walters 2000).

Thus, the extension of the transitional phase in which young people are held between the restrictions of childhood and the increased freedom of adulthood for longer time periods as a result of rising youth unemployment and increasing post-16 participation in education and training has meant that the social experiences of young people are now more prominently characterised by confusion and contradiction (Wyn and Dwyer 1999; Smith 2000, and Steer 2000).

### **2.7 Defining the disaffected**

Since the 1980s in a range of countries there have been attempts to rethink patterns of engagement for young people and to account for the experiences of those who come to occupy what could be characterised as the grey area lying between stable employment and recognised unemployment. As a result of changes in the UK benefit regime in the later 1980s, which left most of those aged 16–18 years without

access to unemployment benefits there was a need for an indicator to capture young people who were not in employment, education or training (Furlong 2007). Both researchers and Government officials started to adopt new ways of estimating the prevalence of labour market vulnerability among young people.

A study of young people in South Glamorgan by Istance et al. (1994 and 1996) marked a watershed. They introduced the term Status Zer0 to refer to a group of people who were not covered by any of the main categories of labour market status (employment, education or training). Their work indicated the existence of a section of young people who were dropping through the net for some reason, either because they wanted to or because they found it difficult to comply with the dominant value systems, expectations and opportunities in society.

The initial 1994 study was focused on a small group of young people whose predominant post-school experience was of being in Status Zer0. The researchers argued that having slipped through the system's net two common threads ran through the current behaviour of these Status Zer0 young people: short-termism and opportunism. These manifested themselves in lives lived from one day to the next based on signing on, casual employment and petty crime in a culture of survival.

The researchers suggested that in spite of the differences in backgrounds between the respondents, they all had bad experiences which partially propelled them to their current situations. This 'tangle of pathologies' included: non-school attendance; fractured childhoods as a result of 'broken homes'; at least temporary homelessness; brushes with the law; forms of violence and sexual and physical abuse; and drug misuse (1994:28). These were then often compounded by an alleged lack of interest amongst those professionals with whom they came into contact whom they believed had let them down in some way. Overall, they suggested that the majority of their respondents were experiencing a sense of drift and a lack of direction which was exacerbated by a sense of low self-esteem and uncertainty about the future and a weak sense of locus of control.

Later researchers began to use the term NEET in place of Status Zer0: a term that drew attention to the heterogeneous nature of the category and avoided the negative

metaphorical connotations of 'counting for nothing and going nowhere' (Wilson et al. 2008).

The term NEET was formally introduced at the political level in the UK in 1999 with the publication of the Labour Government's *Bridging the gap* report (Social Exclusion Unit 1999). The term rapidly gained importance beyond Britain, and by the beginning of the last decade, equivalent definitions were adopted in almost all EU Member States. Countries such as Japan, New Zealand, Taiwan and Hong Kong also developed their own NEET definitions (OECD 2009).

As a term NEET has always lacked clarity, however. The 'NEET group' in the UK was never a uniform set of individuals – it covered both those who were NEET for a short time while essentially testing out a variety of opportunities and those who had major and often multiple issues and were at long-term risk of remaining disengaged from education and employment (Byssche et al. 2008). The confusion over the characteristics of NEET was compounded by changes to the age range to which the term was applied. Istance et al.'s (1994) study explicitly referred to 16 and 17 year-olds who were ineligible for unemployment benefits but who were eligible for youth training programmes. This approach was logical in that those under the age of 18 were covered by a set of policies that do not apply to older age groups. Later definitions have extended the age range to cover 18 and even 25 year-olds which, in effect, merges groups covered by distinct policies (Wilson et al. 2008)

The category of NEET was also not fixed and static and was subject to the fluctuations of the labour market in general. The Engaging Youth Enquiry (Hayward et al. 2008), for example, divided NEETs into three categories: long-term NEET, those who move in and out of the NEET category (the 'churn' effect) and those who are NEET only for a brief period.

Hayward et al. (2008) also consider another important category of NEET – 'prospective NEET', those young people currently at school, but at risk of becoming disengaged. Other typologies, for example those using Connexions service information, delineate three groups of NEETs: vulnerable young people, long-term NEET (longer than six months) and frictional NEETs who move into the NEET

population and then move out of it again quickly, but may return. These distinctions roughly correspond to other typologies that describe 'core NEET and floating NEET' (LSDA 2006). Core NEETs are young people more likely to have social and behavioural problems. This group includes 'generational NEETs' – young people who come from families where the accepted norm is for adults to be unemployed. Floating NEETs refers to young people who may find they lacking direction and motivation and who tend to move in and out of the NEET group, sometimes engaging in low paid and temporary work and short courses. This group contributes to 'NEET churn' (Hayward et al. 2008).

The global headline statistics also create other problems of analysis. Whilst the number of 16-24 year olds with NEET status reached 938,000 or 15.6 per cent of this age group in 2013, this is not a new problem created by a contraction of the youth labour market during the recent recession. According to Gracey and Kelly (2010) the NEET figure remained stubbornly high at around 10 per cent of all 16–24 year olds throughout the 'boom years' of the last decade, even though the NEET group simultaneously received a huge amount of targeted spending. It is evident that the NEET issue reflects a longer term problem within the system.

The overall percentage of NEETs in the 16–18 year-old age group rose from 10.3 per cent at the end of 2008 to 13.4 per cent in the third quarter of 2009 but has since fallen to 8.5 per cent in 2014. Overall, 162,000 16–18year olds have stopped taking part in education, employment or training (DfE 2014) in the UK. Among 18 year olds the figure was 113,560 or 16.6 per cent – a rise of 2.4 percentage points from 2010. With the exception of Japan, the UK has a much higher number of young people not in employment, education or training than its OECD partners. The figure of 8.5 per cent compares to six to seven per cent of the USA's 16–19 year olds and only around 4.8 per cent of Germany's. There is also a wide variation by region across the UK. For example, in the North East, some 17 per cent of 16–18 year olds are NEET, while in the East of England the figure is much lower at seven per cent (DfE 2014).

According to Furlong (2006) the official policy approaches to identifying the size of the category, the 'snapshot', never account for much more than one in five of the

broad NEET category. He also argued that young people may move rapidly between different statuses without spending long periods without work. In addition, the usage of the umbrella term NEET bundles together disadvantaged people who may lack the resources to navigate transitions or exercise choice with more privileged young people who are able to exercise a significant degree of choice regarding the ways in which they manage their lives (Furlong 2006):

Arguably, the confusion generated by the promotion of a heterogeneous category like NEET, in which different categories of experience are combined, can help encourage the transfer of blame to young people while underplaying the significance of deprivation and limited opportunities( Furlong 2006: 98).

## **2.8 Characteristics of those deemed 'NEET'**

The literature suggested that there are two principal risk factors relating to vulnerable NEET status: disadvantage and disaffection. While social disadvantage is associated with social factors such as family, school and the personal characteristics of the young person, disaffection is concerned with the attitudes young people have towards education and schooling specifically, as expressed by truancy or behaviour that leads to school exclusion. There also seemed to be a clear correlation between both social disadvantage and disaffection among those aged under 16 years and later disengagement (Social Exclusion Unit 1999).

### Social disadvantage

Contemporary debates about NEET tend to be linked to the social exclusion agenda. NEET has been understood in structural terms; as an outcome largely experienced by those lacking in social and human capital (e.g. Colley and Hodkinson 2001; Pemberton 2007 and Yates and Payne 2006). Many researchers' studies highlighted strong links between NEET and various indicators of disadvantage (e.g. poor qualifications, residence in areas of high deprivation). In particular, research placed great emphasis on family background and individual characteristics as determinants of NEET status (Stoneman and Thiel 2010).

### Family background

Over the last 15 years, a growing body of research has become available, including quantitative analysis of large datasets, smaller-scale qualitative studies and conceptual analyses (Thompson 2011). Much of this work pointed to the persistence of structured inequalities, particularly in relation to class, and the relationship between being NEET and social class.

There were clearly defined links between the likelihood of becoming NEET and lower social economic status (Thompson 2011). Early studies by Bynner et al. (2002) and Bynner and Parsons (2002) have identified several 'risk' factors of becoming NEET in the UK. Using data from two British birth cohorts (the National Child Development Study of 1958 and the British Cohort Study of 1970), they have found that family socio-economic background (i.e. class); parental education; parental interest in the child's education; area of residence and living in rental accommodation; and children's educational attainment were all strong predictors of later-life NEET status. More specifically, Coles et al.(2010) noted that the young people least likely to be NEET are those living with two parents in owner-occupied housing with a father working full time; conversely, children receiving free school meals in their final year of compulsory schooling are considerably more likely to become NEET than those who are not. These conclusions cohered with some of the results from the Europe – wide European Value Survey (2012) that posited certain intergenerational influences and family backgrounds have a significant impact on the probability of being NEET:

- Having parents who experienced unemployment increases the probability of being NEET by 17 per cent
- Those with parents with a low level of education are up to 1.5 times more likely to be NEET than those young people whose parents have a secondary level of education and up to two times more likely than those whose parents have a tertiary level of education.
- Young people whose parents are divorced are more likely to be NEET.

Pemberton (2008) also noted that NEET young people generally have lower levels of support from their families than other young people. This is a significant

disadvantage because support from parents, along with parental knowledge about maximising potential opportunities, is an important source of help for young people entering or re-entering employment, education or training and reduces the likelihood of them becoming NEET. Parental support also creates the conditions for informal advice networks, work experience and exposure to opportunities (Pemberton 2008).

### Individual characteristics

At the individual level, characteristics overrepresented among the NEET population are: low academic attainment (Eurofound 2012; Coles et al. 2010; Macdonald and Marsh 2001); teenage pregnancy and lone parenthood (Morash and Rucker, 1989; Cusworth 2009 and GLA 2007); special education needs and learning difficulties (Cassen and Kingdon 2007; Social Exclusion Task Force 2008 and Eurofound 2012); health problems and mental illness (Macdonald and Marsh 2001 and GLA 2007); involvement in criminal activities; low motivation and aspiration including lack of confidence, sense of fatalism, and low self-esteem (Social Exclusion Task Force 2008; Macdonald et al. 2005 and GLA 2007).

Overall, NEET rates are gendered and increase with age. Young women aged 16 are less likely to be NEET than young men, with rates of 3.9 per cent and 6.3% respectively in 2013. However, by age 18, the gender gap has decreased as a proportion of overall rates, the corresponding figures being 15.3% and 17.7% (DCSF 2009b). The circumstances under which young people are NEET are as varied as the history of young people NEET literature has highlighted. This indicates that the remedies required are not a 'one size fits all' solution (GLA 2007:51).

### Motivation and NEETs

There is a common assumption in the UK, particular in policy arenas, that while NEETs come from diverse backgrounds, what they do have in common is 'low levels of aspiration and little motivation' (Popham 2003:8).

Educational disaffection, one of the root causes of becoming NEET, usually manifests itself through truancy, exclusion, or leaving school with few or no qualifications at age 16. When it is a central factor, it is important to recognise how early it can start. Some young people will often have started disengaging from the

system long before they reach 16. OfSTED (2008a) found that 25 per cent of persistent truants in Year 11 were NEET the following year. Persistent absentees were seven times more likely to become NEET than their counterparts. In addition, the longitudinal study of young people in England (DCSF 2008a), for example, found that young people who had negative experiences of school were more likely to drop out of the system and become NEET two years later.

In a study of disengaged young learners (Lumby 2011), several factors were highlighted as contributing to their disinclination to learn:

- According to the learners some teachers did not like, respect or care about the learner in question. In the most extreme cases, some learners believed they were being victimised by particular teachers who were deliberately sabotaging their efforts to succeed.
- The general pace and level of teaching and the heavy demands placed on them by coursework and a curriculum which did not meet their learning needs. In particular, they disliked passive teaching methods.
- Some displayed a lack of maturity which created for them a lack of understanding of the importance of their education which was allied with a failure to control their emotions whilst under the stress of learning in a classroom, general negativity and lack of ambition (2011:20).

Solomon and Rogers' (2001) study used the views of pupils in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), plus the views of their tutors and others to try and throw new light on the causes of disaffection. They challenged the current assumption that disaffection is the result of an inappropriate curriculum and that the best remedies are those which are 'vocational' or out-of-school.

Their study looked at examples of recent research into disaffection which tended to focus on the school curriculum as the main cause of pupil alienation. According to



these, the curriculum is seen by pupils as simply irrelevant to their needs. Key aspects of the National Curriculum – such as lack of choice and lack of practical activities – were said by pupils in at least two large-scale surveys to be major problems, as were pupil-teacher relations (2001: 19). They observed that vocational solutions ignore other important findings from the research, which is that pupils also avoid or disrupt lessons that they find stressful or difficult.

They suggested that by obsessing over vocational solutions practitioners may be overlooking individual characteristics which determine pupils' experiences of schooling. These may suggest other solutions instead of – or as well as – a move into vocational courses. From their own research data the picture which emerged was more complex than the simple academic vs. vocational divide suggested by earlier researchers.

These researchers found that most of the students who were surveyed were not interested in any form of further education, however relevant or practical, but they did not reject the academic curriculum. In addition, students in the PRUs perceived lessons as boring, because they did not see them as relevant. Most also thought themselves to be able learners relative to their age group. Importantly, they saw effort rather than ability as the major determinant of success or failure (2001: 23).

Both the interview and survey data showed the students to have low levels of self-efficacy, or the perceived ability to be agents of change in their own lives. They tended to portray themselves as people to whom things happen which were largely out of their control. Inevitably, this also meant that many of the students did not have any sense of vocational direction.

Solomon and Rogers (2001) argued that their results point to a need for a more detailed examination of young people's perceptions of school and of their place as individuals within it. According to them their analysis of the interview and survey data on motivational patterns should be set against the curriculum issues and they suggested that effective proposed solutions to disaffection should address individual learner differences. They go on to suggest that the notion of self-efficacy may

provide a key to understanding disaffection and to designing the right solutions for those who may be deemed to fall into the category of potential NEET (2001:38).

Extant research into the taxonomy of contributory factors to disaffection invariably highlights self-diagnosed personal attitudes to learning and critiques of the education system as a whole by young people. This is a common feature of interview data obtained from disaffected young people (Cassen and Kingdon 2007; Birdwell et al. 2011; Goodman and Gregg 2005).

The notions of static fixed attitudinal and dispositional compositions within young people in vocational education have also been challenged by the work of Lorna Unwin (2001; 2002; 2004; 2006 and 2008). Lorna Unwin's research, in association with a variety of other colleagues, has focussed on apprenticeships as an alternative to full-time vocational education. One of her main themes has centred on the concepts of work-based learning and the importance of young people's educational and life experiences in the formation of vocational identities within the context of work place structures and cultures. In Unwin and Wellington's study of the modern apprenticeship scheme (2001) they discuss the significance of 'turning points', some self-initiated, some imposed and some the result of reappraisal which caused the young people in their study to change direction after leaving school. Drawing upon the work of Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000), who argue that young people develop and change their dispositions to knowledge, learning and career choices, often beginning with narrow horizons but broadening out to embrace new experiences, Unwin and Fuller (2004) suggest that:

the attitudes and aspirations apprentices have on entry to the workplace are not fixed. Young people's vocational identities evolve during the course of their engagement with the learning opportunities (and barriers) afforded by the workplace (2004: 178).

The central problem of the discourse of individualism, which can be found in some of the literature cited above, is that participation is conceived as increasing individual employability by developing work-related skills, attributes and dispositions. Conversely, factors which increase the risk of disengagement from learning and employment, such as low attainment, lack of ambition, and negative attitudes and

behaviours are essentialised, regarded as properties of young people, families and communities, rather than as consequences of structural inequality. Thus it could be suggested that:

The introduction of subjective dimensions to the risks of becoming NEET evokes the moral underclass discourse of social exclusion in which disconnection from education, work and society is assumed to derive from a cultural malaise within families and communities (Levitas 2005: 81).

According to Thompson (2011) this shifted the blame from the system and 'places the balance of responsibility on a group of vulnerable young people rather than the state, employers and schooling' (2011: 45).

Perhaps most significantly, NEET distracts attention from substantial and firmly entrenched inequalities within both education and employment. Ball (2003) showed how education markets lead to social stratification in post-16 choices, with those most constrained in cultural and social capital 'choosing' low-status courses.

Steven Roberts work highlighted the problems faced by working class young males, in general, in their battles to deal with structured inequalities in school and in employment (2011, 2012 and 2013). Roberts' main area of focus was on those 'who are ill-served....overwhelmingly outside the conventional academic tracks' (Wolf 2011: 21) those young people who were not following the 'conventional academic tracks'. These were the 'invisible majority' of young people who fell between traditional middle class university progression and the excluded status of NEETs (2013).

In several articles, Roberts focussed on young 'middling' working class males and highlighted the issues they faced in their transitions to adulthood. He showed how this group did not fit into the traditional fast-track/slow-track dichotomies of transition and seemed to follow a 'hybridised route' from average achievement at school to routine employment in white collar sectors like retail and the service industries where there was little autonomy and few opportunities for developing new skills (2011 and 2012).

The young people in Roberts' typology face the same class and opportunity restraints faced by those characterised as NEET in the work of Istance et al (1994) and Furlong (2006) but manage to negotiate the obstacles. They live a ratchet or two up the social scale from the most disenfranchised and most vulnerable. These young people are depicted as 'getting by', navigating a maze of limited options and fragile work situations and temporary NEET status. Roberts characterises their position in the labour market as:

'Despite featuring as a positive employment statistic, many people in such jobs face being caught in a low wage, low skills jobs trap with little or no attention paid to the implications of such a situation' (Roberts 2012: 213).

According to Roberts (2009) and Ecclestone (1999), post-16 education or training is for many young people, a continuation of efforts to achieve low level vocational or basic skills qualifications and hence that stable post-16 participation can also be a part of social exclusion, with the least advantaged locked in to courses with few prospects which are merely a prelude to later experiences of fragile employment prospects. In spite of this, the mainstream discourse about the NEET group has led to policies that, in structural terms, focus on the identification of needs and barriers and providing and supporting access to education, employment and training (Ball 2003).

## **2.9 Supporting access to education and training**

Maguire (2013) argued that three key factors need to be taken into account when devising policies targeted at NEET young people:

- a) the need to distinguish between 'preventive' and 'reintegration' strategies;
- b) a recognition that, rather than being 'vulnerable' or 'marginalised', many have average or just below average levels of attainment, live at home supported by their family and, as such, can become 'invisible' .
- c) the rising numbers of young people, whose destinations are 'unknown', rather than NEET, may constitute an emerging underclass.

She suggested that the types of interventions which have been shown to be successful included:

- Identifying, targeting and supporting 'at risk' students, especially through the use of assessment tools and one-to-one intensive mentoring support.
- Offering financial support to those from lower income households
- Within schools, the introduction of alternative curricula, the provision of more vocational and technical education and working in partnership with other organisations, such as specialist technical colleges, charity/voluntary sector and employer organisations

Maguire et al. researched the Activity Agreement (AA) pilot schemes (between 2006-11) in different approaches to raising participation in post-16 education and training among young people in the NEET group through the offer of financial incentives, individualised learning packages and intensive support (Maguire et al. 2011). According to them, individualised learning programmes were the most far-reaching strand of AA policy development, in that they enabled young people, along with their advisers, to opt for bespoke packages of learning.

They claimed that whilst this approach ran the risk of allowing young people to choose inappropriate and expensive options, the evidence from the evaluation suggested that young people, with the guidance of their advisers, were able to identify practical, relevant and cost effective options. Consequently, the most popular choices of provision under AAs were basic skills, work taster courses and personal development programmes. They concluded that the piloting of AA also had an impact on the delivery of education and training provision, through encouraging far greater flexibility in what was delivered, where it was delivered and how it was delivered and that: 'This was largely achieved by working with private - and voluntary-sector providers that were willing to adapt their procedures to meet the needs of individual learners' (Maguire et al. 2011: 77).

Her conclusions were broadly supported by the Greater London Authority (GLA) report into re-engaging young learners in London (2007). Firstly, it emphasised the importance of individualised support of disengaged learners:

with the adult engaged with the young person acting as a key advocate for their activities and engagement with alternative forms of support and

education. This extends to additional personalised support shaped by the extended knowledge that the adult has about the young person involved and their specific needs (2007: 22).

Secondly, the need to re-motivate the young person through making their education and training relevant to their individual needs and aspirations:

As a one deputy head commented: NEET generally have a completely different perspective on education than other pupils, the national curriculum does not interest them, and often they do not come from an environment that values education (2007: 23).

Central to these studies were notions of employability. The authors of the report noted that many young people in the NEET category expressed the strong desire to find employment but lacked the vocational skills, the 'soft skills' and the qualifications to realise their dreams. Many respondents to the reporting team highlighted that their most successful activities focused much more closely on working with the young person to identify their aspirations and identifying with them the routes that they should take in order to reach their life-goals (2007: 34).

The benefits of these approaches were identified by the young people themselves in the study. They felt empowered through being given choices to determine their own future, the opportunity to develop new more equal relationships with adults who worked with them rather than against them and developing self-confidence and self-esteem.

According to the report:

The key way in which young people value the delivery of this approach is their link with a designated trusted adult with whom they build a strong relationship founded on advocacy, brokerage and support. Often this is the first time that they have had this kind of relationship with an adult in their lives (2007: 36).

The importance of working with learners and providing them with opportunities to have a 'voice' was also highlighted in a study by Whitehead and Clough (2004) of 139 Year Eight pupils from two schools in an Education Action Zone (EAZ). They concluded that:

Schools need to recognise pupils...as key participants in the process of democratic education reform. If zone schools are to empower people and communities, decision makers need to listen to pupils' views. This would allow the possibility that policies can be:

- informed by the pupils;
- owned by the pupils; and
- supported by the pupils (2004: 5).

Similar points were raised by OfSTED (2008) which undertook a survey of 29 secondary schools, including one academy and one pupil referral unit (PRU), selected because they had shown a decrease in unauthorised absences between 2004 and 2006 and had a record of sustained good practice in re-engaging disaffected students in their learning.

It suggested that certain features were common in those schools that were successful in re-engaging disaffected pupils and making them enjoy learning again. The staff was committed to helping the students succeed, which they expressed clearly to students and their families. The school ethos was based upon valuing and respecting the needs of individuals and thus, the students felt part of the school. There was stringent monitoring of all students' academic, personal and social progress. Teaching assistants provided vital individual support which allowed teachers to focus on teaching the whole class.

Pastoral support was managed by assigned support staff. Effective communication with students and their families was always present. Clear effective and differentiated support was always available and there was the provision of a flexible curriculum, involving a range of independent training suppliers, at Key Stage Four (2008: 12).

Birdwell and colleagues' (2011) research looked at forms of intervention adopted by its case study areas in Shoreditch and Burnley to reach young people at risk of becoming NEET from early years to post-16. They outlined a range of options in content, approach and delivery: 1:1 intensive mentoring programmes; holistic strategies designed to tackle a range of socio-emotional and educational needs in

one setting and employment and key skills building, delivered by the local authority, the third sector and charities, private sector employees and volunteers.

I do not intend to discuss their conclusions relating to early years education as it is beyond the scope of my research but intend to highlight some of the conclusions relating to upper pre-16 and post-16. They argued that there are clear deficiencies in implementing the following standard strategies:

- *Targeted 1:1 mentoring*-partly because of the dual role of Connexions, which is asked to provide both generic advice for all learners and specific help for those at risk.
- *Employability programmes* aimed at developing work-related knowledge and skills- which are hampered by poor organisation and varying quality
- *Key Skills* building—which is hampered by a lack of communication between schools and post-16 providers and funding.

Colley (2001) was also highly critical of many of the methods used to support young people at risk. In her extensive research into mentoring (2001; 2003a, 2003b, 2011, 2014a and 2014b), Colley condemned the use of individual mentoring as a means of re-engaging young people. She argued that the model treats personal disposition habitus as a raw material to be engineered into 'employable' dispositions, with little or no acknowledgement of the institutional or structural fields of power that constitute a mentoring relationship. She saw attempts to reform young people's attitudes, values and behaviours via personal mentoring as part of managerialist employability discourses to re-invent their own identities as marketable products (Colley 2001). Thus:

dominant policies for mentoring and guidance do indeed target the entirety of the person, but not through an holistic approach as it was originally defined. They target aspects of the person and give them meaning in relation to external objectives determined by the interests of dominant others, not in relation to each other ( Colley 2003a: 94).



She claimed that essentially the outward appearance of mentoring appears to be one of bonding of an empathic relationship and individual personal development: 'Yet its essential functions become surveillance and control' (2003b: 264).

Lumby (2011) focused on the importance of a supportive learning environment as a key factor in motivating those who are disinclined to learn or who struggle at school. She emphasised the value of changes in pedagogy and learning conditions and their impact on the autonomy of learning and improvement of personal relations in classes. The conditions which she claimed were conducive to learning for these types of young people were: clarity of instruction, experiential methods, socialised learning based on collaborative methods and clear direction on improvement through effective teacher feedback. She suggested that these approaches are said by learners to be more prevalent in FE colleges and PRUs than in schools (2011: 37).

These conclusions have been supported by the work of Joe Harkin into effective vocational pedagogy. Harkin's work focuses on the post-16 sector of education which when compared to pre-16, which tends to give rise to more formal modes of interaction, required 'forms of interaction that were consonant with the world of adulthood and work' (Harkin and Davis 1996a).

According to Harkin (1998) and Harkin and colleagues' (2001) research into learners' views of effective teaching, there was strong evidence that the affective dimension was by far the most important factor in the interaction between teachers and students and that improving the quality of human relations in an institution improves the autonomy and learning independence of learners. Relationships matter to learners because they bring to education not only a desire to know but also to be and to become. They are present not only in the role of 'learner', but also in that of 'human being' and learners expect teachers to manifest the wider role of human being too (Harkin and Davis 1996b). They argued that effective teaching appears to require a blend of behaviours described as 'understanding leadership'. The most important element of this was appropriate affect - such as knowing student's names, spending a little time with them beyond formal teaching, and a form of control that emphasised high standards (Harkin 2007). At the heart of this was developing a

communication style which was affective. He concluded that if this is developed it will impact on learners' self-efficacy and increase learner autonomy.

This was also evidenced in his studies of 14-16 year olds in Further Education who responded well to 'being treated liked adults' there and the mutually respectful relationships with staff which many found lacking in schools (Harkin 2006).

He showed communication styles vary according to the course. Outcome-based courses tended to be more empathic, learner-centred, less authoritarian, more interpersonal and warm in communication approaches and hence promote more learner autonomy than non-outcome and traditional courses (Harkin and Davis 1996a and Harkin 2012). His work on General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) programmes showed that learners indicated that they found their teachers explained things more clearly, they acted more confidently and talked more enthusiastically about the subject and responded well to their involvement in shaping the lessons and building trusting relationships (Harkin and Davis 1996b).

Harkin emphasised the teaching of process skills (such as problem solving, independent learning and communication) which are embedded in specific academic and vocational knowledge, skills and work situations and, in consequence, should be developed within learning and work situations. He argued that successful teaching was dependent upon what he termed 'leadership' (giving learners a clear sense of the organisation of learning) and 'understanding' (the developing of interpersonal affective relationships with learners) and these in turn would help develop active and autonomous learners (Harkin 2010)

## **2.10 Conclusion**

During this review of literature I have focused upon several key themes; vocational education and the Diploma, the characteristics of those young people who have struggled in mainstream education and the diversity of ways in which people have sought to re-engage them in education. Many studies have highlighted the deficiencies of vocational courses open to young people today; the limited options available to Level One learners; their lack of a distinct identity and lack of defined progression routes; the high levels of non-achievement and non-completion of

qualifications; the abundance of courses which have no real value and which can often lead to unemployment or local status jobs. Researchers have discussed the intentions of the Diploma which was partially designed to meet the individual learning needs of those who have struggled in mainstream education and to provide a new more relevant learning experience based upon practical and applied learning. Much research has also indicated structural and pedagogical problems associated with the Diploma: the variations in curriculum planning; the lack of staff training in many key areas, including the teaching of applied theory and Functional Skills; the integration of theory and practical units and one-dimensional and non-differentiated teaching. As already suggested earlier in the chapter these factors all contributed to the demise of the Diploma and its status as one of the many failed 'middle-track' qualifications which have been a feature of vocational education since the 1980s. Inevitably, the consequences of this failure have been felt predominantly by the many thousands of learners who embarked upon the programme.

There has also been much debate about the proposed recipients of the Diploma. Many writers have problematised the concept of 'NEET' placing great emphasis on social and economic determinants, family background and individual characteristics, such as low self-regard, in order to explain why certain categories of young people have struggled at school. There have also been attempts to attribute this to the nature of mainstream school itself, the curriculum, the general pace and level of teaching, passive non-individualised teaching methods and a general lack of 'empathy' and 'respect' shown by teachers at school.

This chapter has also sought to highlight the variety of attempts made in order to re-integrate young people back into the education system. It has discussed the importance of individualised learning programmes; relevant education and training vocational programmes and employability; empowering learners through giving them a 'voice'. It has also looked at specific pedagogical practices such as one-to-one mentoring, experiential teaching and a style of pedagogy and communication which is more affective, more learner-centred, less authoritarian and more warm in approach.

This thesis will now seek to locate the experiences of a group of young people on the Diploma in C&BE who might best be described as previously disengaged and now returning to education within these debates and in doing so will attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the Diploma as a vocational qualification. It will discuss the previous educational experiences of the young people and their motivations for enrolling upon the Diploma. It will analyse how they have responded to a variety of different pedagogical practices and support systems. Finally, it will attempt to demonstrate whether the Diploma had validity as a programme through the eyes of the learners themselves and to what extent vocational qualifications of its kind can re-engage young people who have returned to education.

## Chapter Three - Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

As I discussed in the previous chapters in this research report I intended to track the learning experiences of three sets of 'disaffected learners' in three different centres on the same course, the Diploma in Construction and the Built Environment (C&BE), over a year in order to investigate whether the Diploma was effective in meeting the needs of learners who have been disengaged from education. In particular, I have sought to capture their feelings, thoughts, personal crises and moments of critical significance. The main questions which I have sought to answer are:

- Why did this group of learners choose the Diploma above other qualifications?
- Which teaching and learning methods did they find most appropriate and why?
- Was the type of support they received on the programme significant to their experiences on the programme?

#### Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework is the system of concepts, assumptions, beliefs and themes that inform a researcher's work (Hammersley 1992). A conceptual framework is a structure that organises the currents of thought that provide focus and direction to an inquiry project. It is the organisation of ideas — the central concepts from theory, key findings from research, policy statements, professional wisdom — that will guide the project. The conceptual framework is grounded in the researchers' own experience, existing research, and, often, an existing theoretical base.

My own experience of the issues have been derived from an initial disengagement from mainstream education and almost 25 years teaching experience in vocational post- compulsory education, much of which has been spent teaching Media to those young people deemed to be disengaged. This was the starting point of my conceptual framework

Whilst engaging with existing research, I have tried to treat 'the literature' not as a series of stone tablets to be deferred to, but as a source of ideas about what is going on in the field of study and as a springboard to develop alternative ways of framing the issues. I have sought to do this by a judicious combination of research literature and grey literature. Grey literature has been defined as the various types of document produced by governments, academic institutions, businesses and industries. Grey literature is particularly important in policy areas, where there are many issuing agencies such as think tanks, university-based research institutes, professional and trade organisations, advocacy groups, all attempting to inform and influence the policy-making process. Examples of the latter that I have used in my thesis include reports from, Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), Greater London Authority (GLA), Confederation of British Industry (CBI), The Open University (OU) and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

I have been mindful that there are problems attached to their usage including lack of peer-review, validity and reliability, institutional and political bias. However, I have found them insightful in many places. Some have provided me with important contexts to issues and topics such as the international context of youth disengagement and others have researched local practice contexts which may have not come through as clearly in other literature.

From existing research I have been able to engage with the much contested and changing definitions of vocational education from simply training students in job-specific skills to some notion of preparation 'for life', 'for citizenship', and obsession with formal qualifications and training to the neglect of the wider context (Bloomer 2001: 431).

I drew upon the work of Colley et al. (2003); Atkins (2008); Birdwell et al. (2011) and Wolf (2011) to name but a few, in order to critically analyse the notion that vocational education could provide an alternative progression route to academic education and a means of re-engaging young learners. An examination of the turbulent policy history of vocational education led me to a study of the Diploma. The Diploma was a key example of a vocational qualification designed to meet the needs of those learners who struggled in mainstream education (DFES 2005a). The work of

O'Donnell et al. (2007); OfSTED (2009); Baird et al. (2010); Hodgson and Spours 2008; Smithers and Robinson 2008; Atkins 2010; Macdonald Ross 2010 and Keep (2012) highlighted many of the key problems such as its content and the pedagogy linked to the qualification which helped formulate my research questions.

Underpinning the research were theories relating to the nature of vocational pedagogy and its importance in the teaching of young learners. Harkin's research into vocational pedagogy developed the distinctions between pre-16 and post-16 teaching methods and suggested that effective teaching was based on less formal modes of interaction and communication styles centred within the affective domain (Harkin and Davis 1996a; Harkin and Davis 1996b; Harkin 2010 and Harkin 2012). The importance of a supportive learning context was also much discussed in the literature. Colley et al.'s work (2003) highlighted how learners learn, focussing on the idea of learning cultures and how they transform learners. Many researchers emphasised the importance of pastoral support and targeted individualised support for those learners who were more disengaged and its impact on developing autonomous learners (GLA 2007; Lumby 2011; Birdwell et al. 2011). Much of this research argued the case for individual mentoring. Colley's work on effective support for young people at risk was highly critical of this as an approach, arguing that it was a form of social engineering that seeks ultimately to make young people products for employability (Colley 2001; 2003a, 2003b, 2011, 2014a and 2014b). How to engage disengaged young people became a key question to be discussed in the study.

Central to this was conceptualising the notion of disengagement. Many studies indicated the multi-causal nature of the notion, the attitudes and behaviours associated with it and its varying degrees (Colley and Hodkinson 2001; Heathcote-Elliott and Walters 2000; Steer 2000; Furlong 2007; Byssche et al. 2008; Hayward et al. 2008 and Furlong 2006). The issues crystallised around the much-contested category of the NEET learner, which became a key research concern for government bodies and researchers (Bynner et al. 2002; Popham 2003; GLA 2007; Maguire et al. 2011; Thompson 2011 and Maguire 2013). This served to develop a framework of understanding into the backgrounds of the respondents who were all young people that could have been categorised as NEET prior to the study.

The work of Unwin (2001; 2002; 2004; 2006; 2008), (Unwin and Fuller (2004) and Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) challenged the fixity of the concept of disengagement and linear learning paths and provided insights into the fluidity of learner choices, the nature of turning points and decisions to return to education which became themes to explore in the research.

In this chapter I intend to explain:

- To what extent my research idea and methodology was influenced by existing research
- How I chose the locations and respondent samples for my research
- How I conceptualised my research design
- The methods I used to gather data
- How I analysed data and developed conclusions
- How I dealt with some of the central qualitative research issues

### **3.2 The development of my research questions and methodology**

My investigation of extant secondary literature helped to influence the development of my research questions and my methodology. The election of the New Labour government in 1997 with its emphasis on the economic principles of education and training sparked the growth of much research into post-16 vocational education and training and the experiences of learners or example, Edwards (1997); Unwin and Wellington (2001), Winch (2000) and Atkins (2008 and 2010). In particular, the 14-19 Green paper (2002) prompted many policy studies into the qualifications and the curriculum and the proposed changes in the structure of education. Notable amongst this work was the extensive research undertaken by the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training in England and Wales between 2003 and 2009. From the late 1990s, there was considerable qualitative and quantitative research undertaken into the experiences of young people who were potentially marginalised by the education system produced by the government's Social Exclusion Unit (SEU, 1999 and 2008) and researchers such as Furlong (2006), Maguire and Rennison (2005); Maguire et al. (2012) and (2013).



The inception and piloting of the flagship 14-19 Diplomas (2006) drove research into its effectiveness from a policy and curriculum approach. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was a prominent contributor (O'Donnell et al. 2009) and Lynch et al. (2010). Amongst all the research, however, there was little detailed analysis of the views and perspectives of learners who had dropped out of education and who were now recommencing their education on a single Diploma programme. I decided to make my contribution to the debate by providing an 'emic' account of their experiences on the programme:

Emic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the native members of the culture whose beliefs and behaviours are being studied (Lett 1990: 130).

### **3.3 Research design**

According to Yin, (1989: 29) research design 'deals with a logical problem and not a logistical problem'. Thus for me, I began to wrestle with the question of the logic of my design. My research questions were based on the analysis of a single qualification, the Diploma, a cross-comparison of three centres delivering it and three sets of learners experiencing it. Drawing upon selected literature about research designs, (Johnson 1976; Hammersley 1992; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Savin-Baden and Howell-Major 2013; Atkins and Wallace 2012; and Janesick 2013) I concluded that:

- The overall purpose of the research design was to reduce the ambiguity of the research evidence and,
- It was essential to identify the type of evidence required to answer my research question in a convincing way.
- Data collection methods are secondary to overall design

#### **3.3.1 Ethnography**

According to Goodley (1999: 57) there were different conceptualisations within ethnography. The first is: 'making the strange familiar' which involves the capture of experiences and generally, making sense of the 'culture of the other'. The second is a practitioner's approach to ethnography 'rendering the familiar strange', casting a

critical eye on the policies, practices and dynamics of well-known contexts. I worked mainly in the latter conceptualisation, with a focus on representing an 'emic' perspective from the 'insider's point of view' trying to allow critical meanings and a range of perspectives to emerge from my encounters with respondents.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) wrote that ethnographic work has the following features:

- People's actions and accounts are studied in everyday contexts rather than under research conditions, that is, 'in the field'.
- Data collection is relatively unstructured in two ways: Firstly, it tends not to follow a fixed, detailed and pre-specified research design initially. Secondly, the main categories of interpretation are generated out of data analysis and not built into observation schedules and questionnaires.
- the interest of the ethnographer is in 'fore-shadowed problems' where the task is to:

investigate some aspect of the lives of the people being studied and this involves finding out how these people view the situation they face, how they regard one another and how they see themselves (2007:3).

According to Willis and Trondman (2002) ethnography is concerned with recording and representing the 'nitty-gritty of everyday life' and 'how meat is cut close to the bone' in everyday practices. The aim is to produce 'aha!' effects through the clarity of the work in the minds of readers. They discuss the relationship between the data collected and the theory generated from it as the 'surprise' and advocate a constant shift between induction and deduction. They call this position a 'half way house' between topic and theory, or an 'interface' between ethnographic data and social or policy theory (2002:45).

Most ethnographers focus on the processes members use in constructing or creating their activities and how they find, create and establish order within them, sometimes called, 'the definition of the situation' (Hammersley 1992: 37). A key aspect of this method would be to see what happens first hand in situ and, failing that,

ethnographers use informants and others for their recollections, points of view or interpretations through a variety of communication media. For qualitative researchers an account of these events becomes 'valid' or 'true' if it represents accurately the phenomenon it is intended to represent, explain or theorise, hence, validity is dependent upon a realistic depiction of events.

According to Altheide and Johnson (1994) the key evaluations to be made are the social stratifications of settings, thus, the quality and validity of the information obtained by the researcher will be related to how the researcher 'fitted into' these complex settings and resolved the issues. These along with such dimensions such as physical settings, activities, routines and innovations, social roles, group patterns and basic patterns of order form the 'definition of the situation'. All are held together by what they call 'the realm of tacit knowledge' (1994:389), the unarticulated truths, understandings, silences that join intentionally to symbols of practices. The role of the researcher is then to comprehend, analyse and represent the definition of the situation.

Central to my research questions was understanding and representing the 'definition of the situation' of my respondents. I drew up an initial action plan with deadlines based upon spending as much time as possible in situ (see figure 1.1). I decided to spend at least two hours per week with each group of respondents in this study between February and July 2011 in order to work with them. I believed that my appreciation of the 'realm of tacit knowledge' was also enhanced by my own work in a PRU and teaching involvements with young people who had been similarly disengaged from education.

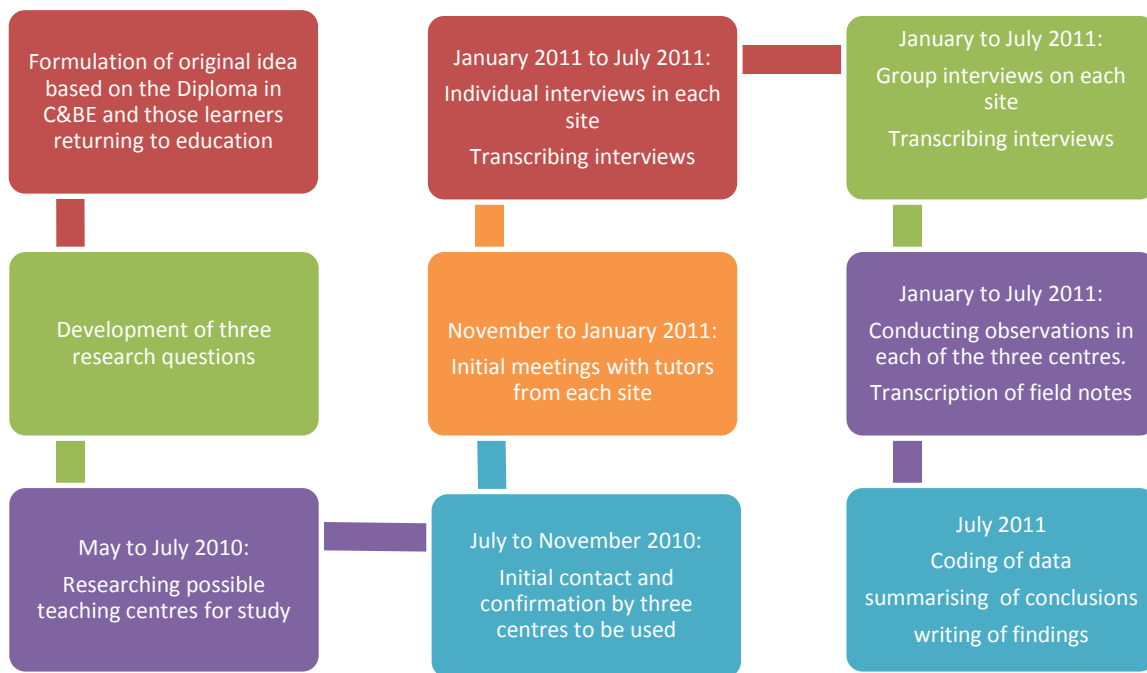


Figure 1.1 Diagram illustrating original deadlines for stages of research

### 3.3.2. Grounded Theory

My choice of methodology was heavily influenced by studying the work of Glaser (1998 and 2001) into grounded theory. Grounded theory was an appropriate approach because it provided a method to deal with my experience, controlling the risk of introducing bias into the study. This control is achieved by the constant comparative method, which forces researchers to state their assumptions and their own knowledge as data (in the form of memos or self-interviews) and to compare these data with other data from the study. The constant comparison of incidents then validates, modifies, or rejects the expert researchers' observations. Thus, for researchers with professional experience in the substantive field of their research, constant comparison is a valuable feature of the grounded theory method. To be sure, constant comparison *reduces*, but cannot completely eliminate, the risk of bias-induced distortions. According to Eisenhardt (1989), using case data to build grounded theory has three major strengths:

1. Theory building from case studies is likely to produce novel theory; this is so because 'creative insight often arises from juxtaposition of contradictory or paradoxical evidence' (1989: 546). The process of reconciling these accounts

using the constant comparative method forces the analyst to a new gestalt, unfreezing thinking and producing 'theory with less researcher bias than theory built from incremental studies or armchair, axiomatic deduction' (1989: 546).

2. The emergent theory 'is likely to be testable with constructs that can be readily measured and hypotheses that can be proven false' (1989: 547). Due to the close connection between theory and data it is likely that the theory can be further tested and expanded by subsequent studies.
3. The 'resultant theory is likely to be empirically valid' (1989: 547). This is so because a level of validation is performed implicitly by constant comparison and questioning the data from the start of the process. 'This closeness can lead to an intimate sense of things' that 'often produces theory which closely mirrors reality' (1989: 547).

### **3.3.2 The research locations**

I wanted to represent a range of post-16 institutions so I decided to select three different types of provider that I felt reflected the current state of the FE sector. I chose a mainstream FE college, a private training provider and a virtual Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). These are the largest providers of provision at Level Two and below in post-16 education and were more likely to offer the Diploma qualification. They are also the most familiar to me having worked in all three types in recent years.

From a Google search of FE college websites, I drew up a short list of five mainstream FE colleges in East London which had experience in delivering the Diploma and which intended to pilot the Diploma in C&BE in 2011. I also tried to select those with experience in teaching young disaffected learners through school liaison partnerships. I also wanted to test whether previous success in dealing with this type of learners would mean these providers were better equipped to deal with the challenges of the Diploma students.

I had established contacts in some of these colleges as a consequence of my observation work as a teacher trainer and 'consultancy work' I had undertaken in the area which helped me to speak to/write to 'the right people'. After many attempts to

contact the relevant managers via e-mail, phone and letter, three of the colleges declined to take part. Two gave no reason for this, but one manager hinted that it would not be in the best interests of the college.

Two Area Heads from the other colleges expressed an initial interest. This was probably helped by my having previous personal contact with them. In the end, one centre withdrew permission in October 2010, (apparently under pressure from a senior manager who mentioned to my contact (an ex-line manager) he was afraid that I was going to 'do a hatchet job on the college'. The only centre which agreed to participate was the one where the Area Head of Construction was an ex-PGCE student of mine whom I had helped in the past by providing PGCE trainees on placement in his department. He believed that my research would ultimately help his department improve its approaches to teaching the Diploma as he had had little experience in this area. Fortunately for me, this centre, Leon College<sup>1</sup>, fulfilled all the main criteria for my research into a mainstream college:

- It had over ten years' experience in dealing with disaffected learners through a variety of short and long programmes;
- It was currently running Diplomas in Hair and Beauty, Media and the Creative Arts and was about to recruit a second cohort for the Diploma in Construction and the Built Environment;
- It was intending to recruit a cohort of learners for the Diploma at Foundation level commencing in January 2011;
- Its construction staff had received specialised training in dealing with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- It had strong consortium links with local schools and local building contractors;
- It was seen in the local area as a successful college that had a high profile;
- It had been commended by OfSTED in its last inspection for its student support and its tutorial provision;
- Managers agreed that I should be provided with good access to students and teaching sessions given adequate notice.

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<sup>1</sup> The name of this site, as with all the names of all three sites used in the study, is fictitious to preserve anonymity.

At the same time I sought the two other institutions that were not part of the mainstream delivery centres in post-16 education. I believed that these would make good points of comparison and also provide me with a wider picture of the FE sector. I approached this task knowing that the private training provider sector was quite large (19,565 providers in 2009, Simpson 2009) but fragmented, consisting of large and small companies working in both the public and private sector, proliferated with 'hobby and jobbing trainers' and sole traders, unstable because of the relatively easy entry routes into the market and characterised by small work forces (over 68% having fewer than five staff members and only 5% over 50) (Simpson 2009: 22). I sought to find one of the largest ones which specialised in public sector training and which had been in existence for more than five years.

I was very aware that because of the instability of the market it was conceivable that it could go out of business before I had completed my research if I made the wrong choice.

I contacted the ten largest independent providers in East London by phone and found that few were interested in becoming involved with the Diploma because they were uncertain about its future. Only one, Learntrade was preparing to deliver the Diploma in C&BE in September 2010. I had already established contact with this centre in the past having provided several PGCE trainees for placements with them. This centre was, not surprisingly, the largest training provider in East London and had also been working in the public sector for over 15 years. It had also recently acquired a construction training arm and had secured a small number of contracts with local schools to teach construction at Level One on a part-time basis to about 50 school children. It hoped to recruit post-16s onto the same programme in September. In the event, as a result of funding difficulties, and a delay in the completion of a canteen, its first cohort was enrolled in January 2011.

Its new centre contained only two teaching rooms, of which one was a workshop. It was intended to house 50 students, both full-time and part-time. (According to one of my ex-PGCE students, who had attended an interview for a construction job at the provider but had declined the job, the workshop was too small for the number of

students they had intended to enrol and too ill-equipped to deal with the variety of skills expected to be taught on the C&BE Diploma)

The centre also shared many of the weaknesses of other independent training providers in that it had few qualified and experienced teaching staff (Simpson 2009). In fact, it had only recently recruited two lecturers for its construction centre, both of whom had considerable construction experience but only limited teaching experience and only qualified recently with Certificate in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector (CTLLS). I was interested to see whether their lack of resources, teaching experience and qualifications would have an impact on the teaching and learning in the Diploma.

I sought to complement this independent training provider with another drawn from the private sector, a private 'Virtual' Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). According to the Department for Education (DfE) (2013) there are over 393 PRUs both publicly funded and privately owned in the UK catering for over 18,000 pupils, mostly aged between 7 and 16 years old. The majority of these Alternative Education Initiative (AEI) providers were directly funded by local authorities under the provisions of the Education Act (1988). AEIs offer responsive and flexible programmes, tailored to the individual needs of young people and strengthened by a safety net of pastoral support. In terms of educational outcomes, AEIs offered a wide range of accredited opportunities. In addition to achieving education-based certificates, a number of young people receive vocational attainments and accreditation linked to personal and social skills development (DfE 2013). I selected 12 AEIs from over 24 that were based in East London. After a website search the majority of those were excluded from first contact because they specialised in under 16s, which is the norm in this sector (OfSTED 2007a).

Inspire was the only AEI in the area which specialised in running courses for 16-18 year olds. It had been established in 2002 and had a good recommendation from the local council with whom it had worked intermittently for the past eight years. The centre specialised in running short, non-accredited programmes, for 16-18 year olds mainly referred to them by the Youth Service and Looked After Children (LAC) services. These programmes were only three months in duration on average and



provided as supplementary education. Inspire offered 'responsive and flexible programmes, tailored to the individual needs of young people and strengthened by a safety net of pastoral support' (company website). It was essentially a 'one person band' with only one fully qualified, full-time teacher (the owner of the company) and it relied upon casual teaching staff and volunteer teenage learning mentors and learning support.

According to its website, it aimed to provide:

bespoke courses, tailor made to fit the different needs of learners who struggled within the confines of mainstream education using creative teaching methods designed to bring out the full potential of young people and develop all their hidden talents (company website).

It had no experience in running long-term, accredited programmes and the Diploma in C&BE was its first venture into the area. I had worked for Inspire on an ad hoc basis teaching English over the past five years (six days in total) and so had a reasonable understanding of its methods. I was mindful that this could have implications for my professional objectivity during my research but I was convinced that I could overcome these problems via triangulation of data and a rigorous approach to data analysis (Hammersley 1992).

### **3.4 The respondents**

#### Sample size and selection

I knew that when I was determining my sample size that there were no hard and fast rules for qualitative studies. There were, however, a variety of factors to be taken into consideration. These included: the scope of the study, the quality of data, the nature of the topic, the heterogeneity of the population; the number of selection criteria, the amount of useful information obtained from each participant, the number of interviews per participant, the qualitative method and study design used (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Mason (2010) makes the following observations: a study that is broad in scope may require a greater number of participants than one that is narrower in focus and that a study that has repeat engagement with participants and an in-depth immersive

element would require fewer participants than a grounded theory study based on single interviews.

Other recommendations include the notion that the sample must be large enough to insure that most or all of the prime research questions are addressed, but at the same time if the sample is too large data becomes repetitive and, eventually, superfluous (Silverman 2007). On one level, the debates in relation to sample size centre on depth versus breadth. Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue that all sample size considerations should be based on the concept of saturation, the point at which the collection of new data does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation.

Mason's (2010) study of PhD abstracts revealed that over 60 per cent of students used 30-50 respondents in their dissertations. In my thesis, I decided to use over 30 for a variety of reasons. Firstly, I wanted data that was rich with experience and relevant to my research questions and believed that the more respondents I had the more usable the data (Wolcott 1990). Secondly, I wanted to represent the most diverse range of opinions amongst the three cohorts that I could in order to get a true picture of their experiences. Thirdly, having worked with this age group of learners for many years I expected that the drop-out rate would be high because of withdrawal from the course, absenteeism and boredom and hence, I selected a large sample size to compensate for this (Mason 2010). As it turned out I lost several of my respondents due to educational issues and many experienced a drop in motivation, which I discuss later in the chapter. Finally, I sought a sample of respondents that was large enough to have validity and small enough to be manageable within the timeframe of the research period.

In the first instance, I approached by email 13 staff members from the three centres who were most directly involved in teaching the Diploma and, after some negotiation with line-managers, three from each centre agreed to participate fully and in addition, some agreed to be interviewed on occasion (table 1).

**Table 1 Profiles of staff in the three centres**

<b>Centre</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Industrial experience</b>	<b>Teaching experience</b>	<b>Teaching qualifications</b>	<b>Number of occasions interviewed</b>
Leon College	Dwayne/ Mike	Nine years	Seven years	Cert. ED	One
Leon College	<b>Steve</b>	Eight years	Three years	PCE	One
Leon College	Chris	Five years	Three years	PCE	One
Learntrade	<u>Steve</u>	11 years	No teaching experience	DTLLS	One
Learntrade	Tom	15 years	No teaching experience	DTLLS	One
Learntrade	<b>Mick</b>	14 years	No teaching experience	DTLLS	One
Learntrade	<u>Lynn</u>	14 years	14 years	PGCE	One
Learntrade	Matt	12 years	12 years	PGCE	None
Inspire	Olivia	16 years	16 years	PGCE	One
Inspire	Nickos	20 years	20 years	PGCE	One
Inspire	Chantelle/ Charmaine	None	One year	PTLLS	One
Inspire	Kerry	None	One year	PTLLS	None
Inspire	<b>Jade</b>	None	Six months	PTLLS	One

The staff who agreed to participate fully in the research are highlighted in bold. Those who agreed to be interviewed for the research are underlined.

The staff members provided me with the initial introductions to their three groups of learners. During my first meetings with the three groups of learners I asked for volunteers. Five of the potential 40 volunteers were already known to me, from working at Inspire, but never taught by me, so these were initially eliminated from the sample because of potential bias. I then decided to use a non-probability sampling frame which involves selection using specific criteria to whittle down the remaining 35 learners.

There are three methods of non-probability sampling namely: accidental, also known as chance or convenience; quota, and purposive sampling. Of the three, purposive sampling was used as I felt it was the most appropriate. A homogeneous sample

was also used because of the possibility of exploring a particular subgroup of people (Grbich 1999).

The particular sub-group I chose for my research were students who had previously struggled in mainstream education. I was very mindful of the problems of labelling which I faced when designing my selection criteria. I did not want to conflate young people with different experiences and conditions into a single category (Russell et al. 2011b) by relying totally upon official criteria such as suggested by OfSTED (2008a), GLA (2007) and DCSF (2008a) but I also needed a structured sampling method in order to capture the appropriate sample. I decided to use some of the general characteristics associated with those young learners deemed 'struggling' from the research literature (Pemberton 2008; Lumby 2011 and Goodman and Gregg 2005) but to be critically aware of these categories as generalisations (Baird et al. 2012). The selection criteria included poor attendance, lack of academic success and general attitude towards education. This gave me a sample of 36 participants (table 2).

**Table 2 Profiles of learners in the three centres**

<b>Centre</b>	<b>Names of Respondents</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Qualifications</b>	<b>School History</b>	<b>Results</b>
Inspire	Ghost	17	Three GCSEs	Expelled from first secondary school.	Passed first year
Inspire	Mile End	17	No qualifications	Left school before taking examinations	Passed first year
Inspire	Ben	16	No qualifications	Left school before examinations	Withdrawn from course
Inspire	Jake	18	One GCSE	Failed to sit rest of his GCSEs	Withdrawn from course
Inspire	Show-off	17	No qualifications	Left school at 15	Passed first year
Inspire	Alfie	16	Two GCSEs (D. grades)	Expelled from first secondary school	Passed first year
Inspire	Patrick	19	No qualifications	Attended three different secondary schools	Passed first year
Inspire	Femi	18	No qualifications	Dropped out of school at age of 14.	Passed first year

<b>Centre</b>	<b>Names of Respondents</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Qualifications</b>	<b>School History</b>	<b>Results</b>
Inspire	Louise	17	Two GCSEs	Failed to sit rest of his GCSEs	Passed first year
Inspire	William	16	No qualifications	Dropped out of school before his exams	Passed first year
Inspire	Markie	16	No qualifications	Left school at 15	Passed first year
Leon College	Kiran	16	Two GCSEs (E grades)	Failed to sit rest of GCSEs	Withdrawn from course
Leon College	Risky	17	No qualifications	Left school before his examinations	Withdrawn from course
Leon College	Danny	17	No qualifications	Left school before his examinations	Passed first year
Leon College	Darren	18	One GCSE	Failed to sit his examinations	Passed first year
Leon College	Andy	16	No qualifications	Left school before his examinations	Passed first year
Leon College	Shannon	17	One GCSE	Failed to attend other examinations	Passed first year
Leon College	Imran	18	Two GCSEs (D grades)	Failed to attend other examinations	Withdrawn from course
Leon College	Sam	17	No qualifications	Left school at 15	Passed first year
Leon College	Pinky	17	No qualifications	Left school before examinations	Passed first year
Leon College	Biscuit Man	17	One GCSE	Failed all other examinations	Passed first year
Leon College	Pyro	17	No qualifications	Left school before examinations	Passed first year
Leon College	Tyrone	18	No qualifications	Left school at 15	Passed first year
Leartrade	Cage	16	No qualifications	Failed to attend examinations	Passed first year
Leartrade	Ciran	17	One GCSE	Failed all other examinations	Passed first year
Leartrade	Carlton	18	No Qualifications	Left school at 15	Withdrawn from course
Leartrade	Mark	17	Two GCSEs (Grades D&E)	Failed to attend other examinations	Passed first year
Leartrade	Chas	17	No qualifications	Failed to attend examinations	Passed first year
Leartrade	Matthew	18	No qualifications	Failed to attend examination	Withdrawn from the course

<b>Centre</b>	<b>Names of Respondents</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Qualifications</b>	<b>School History</b>	<b>Results</b>
Leartrade	Graham	17	One GCSE	Failed all other examinations	Passed first year
Leartrade	Ants	17	No qualifications	Left school before examinations	Passed first year
Leartrade	Tiny	18	One GCSE	Left school before examinations	Withdrawn from course
Leartrade	Bonehead	18	No qualifications	Failed all qualifications	Passed first year
Leartrade	War Kid	16	One GCSE	Failed to attend examinations	Passed first year
Leartrade	Appleby	17	No qualifications	Left school at 15	Passed first year
Leartrade	Samuel	17	One GCSE	Left school before examinations	Passed first year

I then spoke to each learner individually and discussed their previous educational experiences, etc., in general terms. Some of them voluntarily showed me their Individual Learning Plans and school reports. I was pleased with this sample as although I knew that it would be deemed as very large for an ethnographic study (Hammersley 2008), I wanted to represent the views of as many of the cohorts as I could. I was also mindful of the problems of attrition bias (Lepowski and Couper 2002) and believed that having a large number of respondents would help ensure a diverse range of opinion throughout the research project.

During this process, two learners then decided against becoming involved in the study and I decided to include two learners of whom I had previous knowledge (they had attended a one-day workshop on writing skills which I had taught). I was aware that this could potentially skew my results and weaken their validity but believed that because they only formed a small proportion of the overall sample and that I was using a triangulation of data, I could still produce credible results. In the final event, they both failed to turn up for their individual and group interviews.

The students were representative of three main cultural groups. Fifteen learners were white working class with family backgrounds in East London and Essex, eight were Afro-Caribbean and six were Asian, two of whom were born in Pakistan.

All of the students involved in the study groups came from lower socio-economic groups. Their social class was reflected in their lifestyles and their parental occupations and was also evident in the largely gender-stereotyped vocational FE programme that they had enrolled upon. Vocational programmes in general tend to be populated mainly by students from working-class backgrounds and have been widely criticised for socialising students into particular job roles (Apple 1995). They tend to be regarded as of lower status than academic programmes (Atkins 2008; Solomon and Rogers 2001).

As suggested by Atkins (2008) the students' choice of programme, as with many others from their socio-economic backgrounds, was limited by several factors: lack of qualifications which would have enabled them to have access to Level Two courses (both academic or vocational), income, which would have given them the opportunity to apply for a wider range of courses offered outside the local area and lack of cultural capital. .

### Gender

Two of the students in the study group were female. Key socio-economic structures are not the only obstacles denying opportunity to young people. According to Reay (1998) an adherence to traditional gender roles, or 'gendered habitus' in which both young men and young women appear to view the gender divisions as natural and universal tended to form a major part of young people's dispositions and identities. The two respondents from my cohort may have been atypical, however, in this respect and had rather different views about their suitability for the building trade.

They both came from families in the construction trade and believed that a qualification in this area would help them progress in their family businesses. Shannon said to me at the beginning of the course:

*'I never thought that the building world was a man's world. I've worked too long with my dad at weekends to think that.'*

### **3.4.1 Representation and ‘Otherness’**

I was cognisant of what Michelle Fine (1994) called ‘working the hyphen’, which is probing the process of ‘Othering’ and examining the hyphen - ‘self-other’, which both separates and merges the researchers’ personal identities with their inventions of others, so that in the process of re-writing, stories are told back in a way which has become the author’s stories. According to Fine (1994) ‘working the hyphen’, involved investigating how we are in relation to the contexts in which we research, accepting that we are all multiple in these relationships and creating occasions for researchers and respondents to discuss the negotiated relations of whose story is being told and why. In the case of my research I have been very aware of notions such as ‘disengaged’ or ‘failing’ students or ‘NEETs’ that help to construct moral boundaries between those deemed deserving and those deemed undeserving of education and help to create an Other in government publications and the popular press that are represented as beyond redemption. I have tried to tell **their** story as much as possible in **their** words and to provide an opportunity for my respondents to represent themselves.

I was under no illusions that I could ever be an ‘insider’ in spite of my own experiences of education exclusion whilst in my teens, which as I have explained in Chapter One, formed part of the initial drives to my research idea, and my experience of working with young people. I sought to involve my respondents in the research process as much as possible. In the initial stages of the project the young people were involved in the development of an interview schedule and in choosing how some of the data gathering would take place. For example, some of the learners were unwilling to be interviewed individually and decided to only participate in group interviews.

### **3.4.2 Research methods**

#### Research methods

Research methods are the means of answering the research questions and hence, their selection depends not only on the questions to be posed, but also on the actual



research situation and what will work most effectively in that situation to provide the researcher with the data that they need (Hammersley 1992).

### **3.5 Triangulation**

Because the study is concerned with comparison of different types of institution, and using data from a variety of sources, it is following an approach termed as "triangulation". It is, however, important to note that "triangulation" in this context does not mean "three", just "more than one".

The term "triangulation" has its origins in mapmaking, and has been adopted for research in order to: 'map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint...' (Cohen et al. 2000: 112).

Denzin (1970) developed a typology for triangulation, suggesting six categories, four of which are commonly used in educational research: data; investigator; theory; and methodological triangulation. Two of those four types were appropriate for my study. I achieved data triangulation by the use of three different types of institution, and methodological triangulation by the use of interview, reflective diary and observation. Some advocates of triangulation argue that reliance upon a single approach can lead to results which are a construct of the approach, as much as they are an interpretation of the data (Cohen et al. 2000; Smith 1975 and Lin 1976). Sceptics argue that it is, by its very origins, positivistic, and that the use of triangulation in interpretive research must inevitably result in differing responses (Silverman 2007 and Lincoln and Guba 1985).

One of the clearest critiques of triangulation was presented by Massey (1999), who argued that the use of triangulation in sociological research bore no resemblance to its use in surveying, and identified seven common errors made by researchers. In other cases, Massey suggested that researchers used triangulation in order that the strengths of one approach offset the weaknesses of the other(s).

The researcher must, therefore, anticipate as best as they can how their data collection methods will actually work together in practice. I selected four research

methods normally associated with qualitative research: interviews, group interviews, reflective journals and observations in order to constitute an integrated strategy.

### **3.6 Interviewing**

The core thrust of the study was to capture the experiences of the young learners on the Diploma course. As much as possible, I wanted to represent the meaningful perspectives conveyed by them to develop understanding of them and their situation. The most direct and focussed means of achieving this was through individual interviews.

#### Length of interviews

Once again, I recognised that there were no hard and fast rules relating to interview length. To a large extent, this was dependent upon a variety of variables which included the type of research questions, the role of the interview as a data gathering method, the number/type of questions to be asked, the number of interviews in total, the number of interviews per respondent, the amount of available access to interviewees, opportunities for follow up questioning and the research time available to the researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Arguably, the individual characteristics of the respondents also have an impact on the amount of time to be spent on interviewing them. For example, it is suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) that young people respond more effectively in shorter interview sessions (an argument which runs close to confirming the stereotype that young people have very short attention spans!).

Hammersley (1994) recommended that a 10-20 hour database should provide enough data to support a solid qualitative research project. Mason (2010) suggested that for a cohort of 20-30 interviews 20-40 minutes per interview should be adequate. I conducted over 80 interviews and so felt that under the circumstances, the average duration of my interviews, 25 minutes was more than sufficient to generate the rich, impressionistic data which I required.

Interviewing was my principal approach to data gathering. Between January 2011 and July 2011 I conducted over 20 interviews on an individual or a small group basis between 20 minutes and an hour in duration.

The semi-structured questions formed about 40 per cent of the questions and they were used to provide foundations for the interviews and as a springboard for more structured lines of inquiry (Appendix A). The unstructured questions helped to provide more impressionistic free-flowing responses (Johnson 1976). I was aware of the limitations using interviews to record people's perceptions and was mindful of the cautionary words of Hammersley (2008: 100):

We need to remember that what people say in an interview will be shaped to some extent by the questions they are asked; by conventions about what can be spoken about, by whom and to whom, by what they think the interviewer wants; by what she or he would approve or disapprove of ...

I did not utilise structured interviewing as a data collection method. Structured interviewing refers to the process whereby the interviewer asks each respondent a set of structured questions with a limited series of response categories, where there is little room for innovation in response except where an infrequent open question is used. The interview takes place in a structured setting, the questions are sequenced and there is little flexibility in the way they are asked or answered (Johnson 1976). This style of 'interested listening' is deemed to elicit unprompted, neutral and truthful responses within a stimulus-response format, but seemed to me to be an inflexible mode to record social interaction and much too rigid and one-dimensional a method to work within the social context of my group, the physical context of the interviews (which often took place in empty classrooms, canteens and student car parks) and the individual personalities of the individuals themselves.

Unstructured interviewing as an approach seemed to me to be the most appropriate within my research context. Whereas structured interviewing aims to capture pre-coded data to explain behaviour in pre-established categories, unstructured interviews operate more effectively to interpret the complex behaviour of groups without a priori labelling that may limit the inquiry field. According to Fontana and Frey (1994), the very essence of the approach is: 'the establishment of human-to-human relationships with the respondent and the desire to understand rather than to explain' (1994: 64). Some of the basic elements of the 'grounding' of the process include assessing the setting and gaining access; understanding language and culture; developing an insider role or 'translator of cultural mores'; gaining trust and

establishing rapport with its attendant problems of 'going native' and collecting empirical materials (1994: 65).

Within the general framework of the unstructured interview, I used the following techniques: 'creative interviewing' ('going with the flow', allowing interviewees to express themselves freely and having a greater voice in the process and outcomes) and 'interpretative interviewing' (which focuses on 'critical moments' of interviewees lives where key moments have transformational effects and thus dramatise the topic of inquiry (Fontana and Frey 1994: 369). Overall, interviews were framed around a 'give and take' (1994: 370) style of questioning without directing, intended to build rapport, gather tacit knowledge and treat the interviewee as an equal (or co-researcher) allowing the learners to express their feelings and ideas without judgment (Appendix B). This in turn helped me to paint a fuller and more naturalistic picture than using more structured methods:

the emphasis is shifting to allow the development of a closer relationship between interviewer and respondent, attempting to minimise status differences and doing away with the traditional hierarchical situation in interviewing (1994: 370).

Users of unstructured interviewing techniques tend to assume that the data speaks for itself and that the gathering process is entirely neutral, unbiased and invisible and thus, the on-going interpretation process will be un-reflexive and un-problematic. I have tried to overcome these issues, however, by using the 'confessional style' developed in the 1970s (Johnson 1976), where the interviewer becomes part of the project, and 'de-constructionism' where the biases and taken-for-granted assumptions are exposed and alternative means of interpretation are sought (Fine 1994 and Fontana and Frey 1994).

A variation on this is provided by 'interpretative interactionism', which begins and ends with the biography of the first-hand observer. The role of the researcher is as interpretative researcher (Fontana and Frey 1994) focussing on life-experiences (epiphanies) that radically alter or shape the meanings people give to their life stories or experiences. Through epiphanies, personal character is manifested and made apparent and through analysis of these, moments of crisis can be illuminated and

personal change can be evaluated. For the young people in my study, the opportunity to return to formal study, via the Diploma represented an epiphany and I tried to represent their stories as 'naturalistically' as possible in the 'language, feelings, emotions of those studied' (Denzin 1994: 511). I did over 88 individual interviews over the three centres (table 3).

**Table 3 Respondents and interviews conducted with them**

<b>Centre</b>	<b>Names of Respondents</b>	<b>Number of occasions interviewed Individually</b>	<b>Number of occasions interviewed in group interviews</b>
Inspire	Ghost	3	1
Inspire	Mile End	4	1
Inspire	Ben	4	2
Inspire	Jake	4	1
Inspire	Show-off	3	1
Inspire	Alfie	2	0
Inspire	Patrick	3	0
Inspire	Femi	1	1
Inspire	Louise	1	1
Inspire	William	1	0
Inspire	Markie	2	0
Leon College	Kiran	3	0
Leon College	Risky	4	0
Leon College	Danny	3	0
Leon College	Darren	1	1
Leon College	Andy	1	1
Leon College	Shannon	4	0
Leon College	Imran	1	1
Leon College	Sam	1	0
Leon College	Pinky	3	0
Leon College	Biscuit Man	1	0
Leon College	Pyro	1	0
Leon College	Tyrone	1	0
Learntrade	Cage	3	1
Learntrade	Ciran	3	0

Centre	Names of Respondents	Number of occasions interviewed Individually	Number of occasions interviewed in group interviews
Leartrade	Carlton	3	0
Leartrade	Mark	2	1
Leartrade	Chas	2	0
Leartrade	Matthew	1	1
Leartrade	Graham	1	0
Leartrade	Ants	1	0
Leartrade	Tiny	1	0
Leartrade	Bonehead	1	0
Leartrade	War Kid	2	0
Leartrade	Appleby	1	0
Leartrade	Samuel	1	0

On average I did two per respondent. The total was skewed by some learners who volunteered to do more with me; Jake (four interviews), Ciran (four), Shannon (four) and Ben (four), Risky (four), Pinky (three), Show-off (three) and Carlton (three). Those respondents like Jake, Risky, Pinky, Show-off and Carlton who were in trouble over attendance or at risk of non-completion of the course volunteered to be interviewed more frequently to give 'their sides of the story'. The majority of individual interviews were done just before or after class in order to minimise the disruption for my respondents and not to exhaust their patience with the project. Their average duration was 25 minutes. The interviews tended to be conducted in informal locations such as the canteen areas, the car park (none of the learners at Leon College had cars, but it was the only place they could smoke!), and the student common room. On 42 occasions interviews were recorded using a small digital recorder and on 46 occasions by using a modified short hand system in which I combined 'Pitmanscript' and 'T-line' (Appendix C). I am still a working news reporter in my spare time and I evolved this personal note-taking system over several years.

On three days I used both methods. Interviewing using the recorder enabled me to capture full verbatim responses. The method proved ideal when I conducting longer, more formal interviews, i.e. those located in the student common room which were over 20 minutes long. I began to take hand-written notes when my recorder developed play-back problems in April. My note-taking speed was not fast enough to capture all my respondents' words verbatim but enough to note down most of what was said by them. I always ensured that I had not mis-quoted them or failed to keep up with what they had told me by reading back their answers to them and gave

them opportunities to amend their responses or to expand upon them if they so choose. The interviews were then transcribed and annotated on the script as part of the initial coding process (Appendix D).

Over the period the learners' responses began to fall into a definite pattern becoming less useful to my research study. They seemed to form a sequence which I have called the four Es:

**Excitement** In the initial stages of the research process, during January and February 2011, the respondents were very happy to discuss with me their experiences on the course, their prior learning experiences and so on. Their responses were very open and excited. I was new to them and so was the whole process of being singled out for involvement in a research project. They were keen to know what I was going to use from the recordings, when they were going to be observed, if it was going to be published, etc. They all hoped to be involved in all stages of the project.

**Empowerment** Between February and April the groups began to take more control of the interviewing process. Their responses became more detailed and more honest. (This was also partly due to the fact they had now been on the course for several months and had much more to say!). They replied at length to my questions, suggested follow up questions for me to pose to them and prompted each other during focus group discussions. In the group interviews they began to interrogate themselves whilst I assumed the role of group facilitator. My role became that of enabler as they were given the freedom to start to form their own stories (Fine 1994).

**Exploitation** After Easter, about one third of the respondents became openly critical of me, the research project and especially the amount of their free time I was taking up in interviews, discussions and questionnaires. Some raised questions about my motives for pursuing the research: 'You're going to make bare dough from this and we get nothing in the end.' was one totally misinformed comment. Others suggested that I was doing this deliberately to get the course closed down which would leave them with nothing. Those who weren't openly hostile were more guarded in their answers and often gave me single word responses.

**Exhaustion** Between June and July 2011 many of the respondents became less communicative in group interviews and attendance at these became very erratic. This was partly due to the 'demobilised' feelings generated by the end of term and final assessments and partly due to being bored by their involvement in the survey. I decided therefore to stop them temporarily and continue only with individual interviews.

#### Attrition bias

I was mindful during this period of the impact that attrition bias might have upon the external and internal validity of my overall findings (Lepowski and Couper 2001). I attempted to overcome the impact of this on the strengths of my data in several ways. Firstly, I reduced the amount of interview time I spent with those who did not want to be interviewed for a long time and spent more time with those that did. This meant that I had to be wary of over-representing certain individuals' views when it came to data analysis and writing up of results (Kumar 2014). Secondly, I spent even more time ensuring that data was accurate by obtaining feedback from my respondents after interviews in situ and when I had observed a class. Finally, I stopped holding group interviews and focussed on individual interviews. I was helped by the strong rapport I have developed with most of the respondents and consistent contact which I continued via emails and during observation visits.

#### **3.6.1 Group interviews**

Group interviews are normally used to provide a researcher with information about what a group thinks about a topic and to document a range of ideas and opinions help by members of a group (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013). Within a group interview the interaction of the group is encouraged by the researcher as they can also observe social practices in action. Group interviews were used in this research as a supplement to individual interviews in four different ways. Firstly, they were used to confirm or contradict what was said during individual interviews (Hammersley 2008). They were also used as a space to speak for those learners who were unwilling to be interviewed individually. Thirdly, they helped to provide question guides for other group interviews or individual interviews. Finally, they provided a means of observing group dynamics and understanding group consensus.



I conducted group interviews consisting of three interviewees on four occasions between January and June lasting one hour. I held one group in Leon College, one in Learntrade and two at Inspire (table 4). They took place after I had been conducting individual interviews in each centre for several months. They were all prompted by the learners themselves because they were keen to discuss issues about the course in their friendship groups. Prior to each one, we agreed jointly on an agenda and I acted as facilitator.

**Table 4 Respondents and group interviews conducted with them**

<b>Centre</b>	<b>Names of Respondents</b>	<b>Number of occasions interviewed in group interviews</b>
Inspire	Ghost	1
Inspire	Mile End	1
Inspire	Ben	2
Inspire	Jake	1
Inspire	Show-off	1
Inspire	Alfie	0
Inspire	Patrick	0
Inspire	Femi	1
Inspire	Louise	1
Inspire	William	0
Inspire	Markie	0
Leon College	Kiran	0
Leon College	Risky	0
Leon College	Danny	0
Leon College	Darren	1
Leon College	Andy	1
Leon College	Shannon	0
Leon College	Imran	1
Leon College	Sam	0
Leon College	Pinky	0
Leon College	Biscuit Man	0
Leon College	Pyro	0
Leon College	Tyrone	0

Centre	Names of Respondents	Number of occasions interviewed in group interviews
Leartrade	Cage	1
Leartrade	Ciran	0
Leartrade	Carlton	0
Leartrade	Mark	1
Leartrade	Chas	0
Leartrade	Matthew	1
Leartrade	Graham	0
Leartrade	Ants	0
Leartrade	Tiny	0
Leartrade	Bonehead	0
Leartrade	War Kid	0
Leartrade	Appleby	0
Leartrade	Samuel	0

Group interviews are group discussions which are arranged to examine a specific set of topics. In conceptual terms, group interviews are situated between individual interviews where only one respondent is involved in a considerably structured setting and participant observation where many participants are involved in a relatively unstructured or 'natural' setting (Barbour 2007).

The main argument for using them in this context is their collective nature. This may suit people who cannot articulate their thoughts easily and provide collective power to marginalised people. The researcher acts as a moderator whose primary role is to facilitate discussion, rather than to direct it. The aim of group interviews in social science research is to understand the participants' meanings and interpretations and to 'encourage a range of responses which provide a greater understanding of the attitudes, behaviour, opinions or perceptions of participants on the research issues' (Hennink 2007: 6). They rely heavily on 'the development of a permissive, non-threatening environment within the group' where the participants can feel comfortable to discuss their opinions and experiences without fear that they will be judged or ridiculed by others in the group (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 99). Hence, they may reduce the imbalance in power relationships between the researcher and participants that grants the researcher the 'authoritative voice'. Instead, group interviews 'create data from multiple voices' (Madriz 2003: 65).

It could be argued that group interviews put control of the interaction into the hands of the participants rather than the researcher. A group interview method is a

research tool that gives a 'voice' to the research participant by giving him/her the opportunity to define what is relevant and important to understand from his/her experience. In this way, the group interview method allows researchers to pay attention to the needs of those who have little or no societal voice (Madriz 1998). The method is especially valuable for permitting the participants to develop their own questions and frameworks as well as to seek their own needs and concerns in their own words and on their own terms (Fontana and Frey 1994). In essence, then, group interviews can be used to uncover 'how accounts are articulated, censured, opposed, and changed through social interaction and how this relates to peer communication and group norms' (Kitzinger 1994: 58).

Commonly discussed weaknesses include superficiality and incoherence of discussion and dominance by out-spoken individuals (Fontana and Frey 1994; Bloor et al. 2001 and Krueger and Casey (2009). I discovered that these issues could be overcome, however, by clear facilitation of the discussions. This is a role I am familiar with because of my many years of classroom experience. I found the group interviews useful as they assisted my respondents to explore and clarify their points of view with their peers and to provide me with insight into the similarities and differences of understandings they held (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

### **3.6.2 Reflective diary**

I decided to supply my respondents with a 24-page weekly diary based on a free form design (Boud 2001). It was semi-structured with four question headings per page which constituted a week (Wheeler and Reiss 1991) (Appendix E). The questions were deliberately designed to be open and simply phrased to encourage them to complete them honestly and unambiguously and to encourage affective comment. Elliot (1997) argued that because the participant has greater control over selections and omissions, a less structured diary can function to encourage the priorities of the participant to rise to the top. In addition,

the weight or importance of an experience will be presented as it is perceived by the diarist, and the diarist can participate more independently of the researcher's initial perspectives, assumptions and frames of reference (1997: 146).

I was also aware that many of my respondents struggle with their written literacy and that completing a more elaborately structured diary involving more complex questions would be placing them under undue pressure. It was deliberately a time-based and fixed-schedule (Bolger et al. 2003) in order to ensure a more systematic flow of data from my respondents who were asked to e-mail the individual pages back to me at the end of each week.

I decided to use the reflective journal mainly as a data-gathering tool in order to triangulate findings obtained from interviews and classroom observations but also in order to ascertain whether they would have any impact on the way that the learners understood themselves and their own learning whilst on the Diploma course.

According to Street (1990) journals as a research tool enabled the researcher to access the 'rich resource of raw data' derived from professional or personal inner - lives of individuals and 'expose this for analysis and action' (Street 1990: 1). Through the process of writing a journal, research participants record their daily experiences, personal feelings, opinions and reflections on issues that are then shared with the researcher and, in some cases, with other people involved in the research process (Hiemstra 2001: 19).

A number of different types and formats of journals have been developed. Hiemstra (2001) identifies nine different types of journals which can be used in a variety of ways: learning journals, diaries, reading/dream logs, professional journals, autobiographies/memoirs, reading logs, theory logs and electronic journals. The process of journal writing enables rich descriptive accounts of a phenomenon to be created as a 'prelude to a process where these are reflected upon and examined critically' by the researcher (Street 1990: 74).

Reflective journals are a kind of 'annotated chronological record or a 'log' of experiences and events' (Wellington 2000: 118). The data collected from the reflective journals are those that are generated by the participants themselves which might be difficult to trace via other instruments. According to Marefat (2002: 105), researchers are interested in journals because they are 'records of opinions and

perceptions important for the learner – ideas which cannot easily be tapped in other ways.’

The reflective diary is often used as a method of providing opportunities for respondents to express views and perspectives that could not be articulated in public in interviews or focus groups. As the reflective diary is an on-going form of data collection, it is also useful for tracking the changing attitudes or views of a respondent over a fixed time period. The reflective diary was intended to be used in this research to fill in the gaps between interviews, group interviews and observations and also as a way of providing questions for subsequent interviews and group interviews.

A key advantage of the journal method is the short time between the occurrence of the event and its recording; hence, it can be less subject to memory lapses and retrospective messaging, as maybe the case with interviews (Bright 1996). In this way, the diary may act as a substitute for the direct observation of the subjects and enable the researcher to understand the interplay between person and environment without being in situ.

Wellington (2000: 47) further clarified by suggesting that the rule of thumb for the conduct of reflective journals is to ensure the participants write ‘a chronological account of events with the diarist’s (participant’s) own interpretation or version of them, and reflection on them’. His focus was on critical events or incidents. He argued that ‘by recording critical or significant incidents, the participants can often convey far more than could be achieved by a daily, blow-by-blow account’ (2000: 47).

When this process of writing is coupled with other processes such as interviews or group interviews, respondents can also be encouraged to identify their own actions, practices, values and feelings and hence acquire new information upon which they can base subsequent action in a process that could be counter ideological (Street 1990):

The processes can enlighten respondents to the potentially hegemonic practices that contribute to the development and maintenance of ...unjust practices (1990: 31).

I anticipated that, at times, understandably, the diary responses could be variable in detail and thus, I attempted to triangulate the data using the diary-interview method described by Zimmerman and Wieder (1977). In a few cases, it meant that the interviews could be grounded in and expanding on information captured in the diaries and helping me to develop grounded research and to understand more clearly the strategies and reasoning of some of my interviewees.

The biggest problem I faced, however, was that many of my respondents had poor literacy skills and most were antagonistic towards writing in general. Consequently, they said they found it tedious to complete and thus, they struggled to provide coherent, detailed or relevant responses which I found difficult to analyse (Bright 2006). Examples of two of the responses can be found in Appendices F and G. After having spoken to several of my respondents after a few weeks, I suggested they discontinue with trying to complete the pages.

### **3.7 Observation**

I chose to use observational methods in order to see, first-hand, the kinds of interactions which were taking place in the young people's class and work experience settings. Drawing upon the approaches to observation adopted in the study by Edwards et al. (1997), I decided to focus the classroom observation on the students' learning experiences, in order to gain an insight into the quality of them. This would also have the added advantage of being able to: 'side-step some of the issues involved in starting from preconceptions about activities that 'ought' to characterise academic and vocational teaching and learning' (Edwards et al. 1997: 75). This also had the advantage of enabling data to be collected on events occurring in real-time, in a natural situation, rather than through the more artificial context of an interview, group interview or questionnaire. To some extent this meant that the data would be less influenced by my own research agendas and would (at least in the raw form) be freer from bias.

In practice, classroom observation requires two decisions to be made: firstly, what sampling strategy is appropriate (which subjects are to be observed and when), and secondly, what recording method to use (how the behaviour is logged). Between January and July 2011 I observed 18 one-hour sessions.

### **3.7 1 Observation schedules**

The process of classroom observation is normally categorised either as 'unstructured' or as 'systematic'. 'Investigators using unstructured or flexible observation include social anthropologists and symbolic interactionists, who observe classroom events by immersing themselves in the classroom and joining in the lessons' (Dunkerton 1981: 88). In this case the investigator must have no predetermined ideas about what to look for, and the record of events should be annotated and confirmed by explanations from the teacher and students rather than by the observer alone. Investigators using systematic methods have usually decided what they want to observe and how to collect the data before going into the classroom. I decided to use systematic methods, but made various amendments to the observation categories as a result of the experience of observation, and therefore my final categories were influenced to some extent by 'immersion' in the classrooms.

I decided to use an observation schedule (Appendix H) which I developed from the categories of learner interactions found in Yin (2009) and Wragg (2012). I designed it in order to enable me to record quickly and accurately learning interactions/activities within a range of pre-set categories (Wragg 2012). The types of learner interactions that I included on my schedule and which I plotted provided me with thick 'situational' data (Denzin 1989).

Each group at each centre was seen three times a month. I observed classes in their three core units: Bricklaying, Carpentry and Decorating in the first terms. I wanted to gain first-hand experience of what they were learning in class and believed that my observation methods would give me a clear overview of how my respondents were coping with the course across the three centres (see table 5).

**Table 5 Schedule of observations**

<b>Month</b>	<b>Centre</b>	<b>Duration of observation</b>	<b>Lesson topic</b>
January 2011	Leon College Learntrade Inspire	One Hour	Introduction to Decorating
February	Leon College Learntrade Inspire	One Hour	Sustainability of materials
March	Leon College Learntrade Inspire	One Hour	Carpentry
April	Leon College Learntrade Inspire	One Hour	Functional Skills
May	Leon College Learntrade Inspire	One Hour	Health and Safety at work
June	Leon College Learntrade Inspire	One Hour	Bricklaying
July	Leon College Learntrade Inspire	One Hour	Assignment workshops/Individual tutorials

Each observation was organised with the permission of the teachers, all of whom had previously agreed to participate in my research on an ad hoc basis. They were all fully aware that I was not intending to assess their teaching skills in the classroom (which is a key part of my occupational role as a PGCE lecturer) but was observing classroom interactions. This obviously raised questions about whether it was possible to do so considering that the teacher is normally the catalyst for classroom interactions and therefore it is virtually impossible to disregard his/her effect when observing what is happening there. I was able broadly to satisfy them by telling them that their effectiveness or otherwise as teachers would not come under scrutiny in my thesis. It helped that I had no real professional connection with any of the centres and hence no direct line of communication with their line managers. This was of particular concern with one of my teachers who participated in the research as he had recently been given a Grade Three in an internal inspection (which in current day FE practice amounts to unsatisfactory, Grade Three being the new Grade Four).



In terms of what to look at when undertaking observation, Wragg (1994) argued that unless the research project has pre-specified objectives it is difficult to be precise, though he suggested that following an initial period of relatively unfocused watching, it was essential to start paying close attention to a selective set of phenomena.

Wolcott (1984) proposed three strategies for deciding what to look at and how to look: observations by broad sweep; of nothing in particular and searching for paradoxes.

The broad sweep approach usually has two outcomes: first, it makes the researcher aware of the need for selectivity; second, it makes the researcher aware of what really matters to him/her. The observations of 'nothing in particular' approach is based on a 'wait and see what jumps out' stance and can be compared to watching for a blip on a radar screen that indicates unusual activity. The 'searching for paradoxes' approach is useful for developing a more in-depth understanding of group dynamics.

### **3.7.2 Some problems associated with observation as a data gathering technique**

#### Problems of reliability and validity

Reliability, according to Hammersley (1992: 67): 'refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions'. This is potentially problematic in qualitative research where interpretation plays a key part in the analysis of data. However, reliability can be enhanced by collecting data using more than one method and thus triangulating the results.

Observational methods can also be problematic when it comes to validity, described by Hammersley (1992: 62) as 'the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers'. This is because they are generally used to investigate actions in a natural setting, rather than an artificially induced context (such as an experiment), and they give a first-hand view of events, rather than a

report of actions after the event (such as collected in an interview or questionnaire). In projects where it is important to understand accurately another person's perspective, validity can be enhanced by using some form of 'respondent validation', whereby the research findings are shared with participants, and refined in the light of their comments.

The reliability and validity of the data collected during observation can also be undermined by observer bias, drift and reactivity (Kazdin 1977):

*Observer bias* refers to the 'expectancies' and 'prejudices' of observers, occurring when they record the participant's behaviour. These limiting 'expectancies' and 'prejudices' could result from the observer's prior life-experiences and their knowledge of the hypotheses being tested.

*Observer drift* refers to a systematic change in the operative definition of the behaviours the observer is recording. This can occur when there are a variety of different behaviours to be observed and the researcher makes mistakes in noting them or when the definitions which the researcher is working within are vague or inconsistent (Kazdin 1977).

*Reactivity* is the potential for behaviour of participants to be influenced by the act of observation. This may be enhanced in situations where the observer is known to, and friendly with the research participants.

I was mindful of these issues concerning observation and hence, I triangulated my impressions of the sessions using post-hoc discussions with the learners in order to gain a fuller picture. A key part of the post-hoc sessions involved stimulated recall (Bloom 1953) whereby extracts from my observation reports were read back to the learners for their comments.

I used two criteria to select which observation reports to review with learners. Firstly, I reviewed, if in my professional judgment based on my recordings, I felt that the class was particularly significant in terms of my research questions and secondly, if I

noted specific 'critical incidents' (Tripp 1993), which I felt might be worth exploring as grounded research (Glaser 1978).

This served a dual purpose. It enabled the learners to focus on what actually took place rather than what they imagined, or hoped, or felt took place (even though these were also important to me as a way of understanding their experiences of learning). Secondly, it provided a limited constraint on my recall of events. Argyris and Schon (1974) argued that this helps to prompt the development of 'theory-in use' by the researcher rather than 'espoused theory' which is what I hoped.

### **3.8 Data analysis**

My data analysis commenced as soon as I began to gather data in January 2011 and continued throughout the writing up of the thesis. I saw it as a process of interrogating the data from the various sources, interviews, and observations in a 'systematic search for meaning' (Hatch 2002: 148 cited in Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013: 435).

From the results of the first set of interviews at Leon College, core categories began to emerge (Glaser 2001) which highlighted potential areas of research; 'motivation', 'interactive learning' and 'student support'. Transcribing the interviews from each centre enabled me to develop a set of open and emerging codes which were used to examine consistencies and patterns in the data.

#### **3.8 1 Coding**

According to Hammersley (2008) a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that 'symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data' (2008: 127). A code represents and captures a datum's primary content and essence. There are two main sets of codes. A priori codes are pre-set and pre-categorised and emergent codes are those ideas, concepts, actions and relationships which emerge from reading and analysing the data (Strauss and Carlin 1997).

I commenced my coding with a series of pre-set a priori codes-short words or phrases- used to capture the essence of the statements in the interviews (see

Appendix I). These were constantly revised in the context of my reactions and ideas that emerged from the interviews. At times, re-reading the interviews suggested new interpretations, as well as connections with other data. Invariably the notes I took pointed toward questions and issues for me to look into as I coded and collected more data. These 'emergent codes' were those ideas, concepts, actions, relationships, meanings, etc. that came up in the data and were different than the pre-set codes. The kinds of questions that came into mind included: What is this saying? What does it represent? What is this an example of? What do I see is going on here? What is happening? What kind of events are at issue here? What is trying to be conveyed?

On my transcribed interviews I noted down ideas about the meaning of the text and how it might relate to other issues. This allowed me to adjust the data collection process itself, for example, through follow up interviews, when it appeared that additional concepts needed to be investigated or new relationships explored in a process of progressive focussing (Parlett and Hamilton 1976) .

From these new ideas, concepts, and relationships I began to sketch a matrix which helped to condense my data into simple categories giving me a multidimensional summary that helped to facilitate subsequent, more intensive analysis. (Appendix J).

I began to develop core themes from the disparate material. To a large extent, I was relying upon intuition and trial and error and felt that the process was akin to breaking a series of full-length mirrors and then reassembling them to produce a set of asymmetrical looking glasses.

Once it became clear to me that the emerging core categories were 'motivation' 'interactive learning' and 'student support' subsequent interviews become increasingly focussed, as did the coding, and data which was not relevant was not transcribed or coded. As the data became more focussed central collection categories quickly began to saturate, at this stage data collection stopped (Glaser 1978). I utilised a form of constant comparison analysis of the different data sets which I had aggregated from the three centres (Glaser and Strauss 1967). As

categories started to accumulate and gain depth I began to reflect on the data, and to commence conceptualisation, via 'memos':

The purpose of the constant comparative method of joint coding and analysis is to generate theory more systematically ... by using explicit coding and analytic procedures (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 102).

According to Peshkin (1993) data interpretation is a process of 'unravelling' data and 'recording' outcomes. I hoped to probe beneath the facts and to uncover the wider meanings or at least to translate the underlying meanings of what was said via a process of filtering, ordering and combining bits of data to form a clearer set of pictures (Wolcott 1994). Once I had familiarised myself with it, I used a variety of strategies to support my interpretations. These included the following categories:

- Recognition of organising principles
- Examining sub-texts
- Contextualising interpretation from extant research

(Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013: 544)

#### Recognition of organising principles

According to Savin-Baden and Howell Major organising principles were 'the categories used by people to justify, explain, defend and define themselves' (2013: 455). This approach was used by me to help understand some of my respondents' issues of 'identity' and to help me get to grips with their value-bases and how they saw themselves and in relation to others.

#### Examining sub-texts

During this process the researcher investigates the implicit meaning of communication acts via searching within extrinsic elements such as body language and emotion (2013: 455). I endeavoured to do this throughout the interviewing and interpretation process by annotating transcripts and cross-comparing data taken from different sources.

### Contextualising interpretations from extant research

I continually used my reading to help frame my data interpretations which enabled me to draw connections and to support or to negate my own interpretations. This helped me to develop a critical context for my findings and to make 'sense' of the data (Mills 2006). The set of asymmetrical looking glasses became a large irregular shaped mosaic of mirror-glass to me.

#### **3.8.2 Data interpretation**

During this process I began to develop hypotheses and establish connections between these concepts leading to denser concept-based relationships and hence to grounded theories (Strauss and Carlin 1997). I checked these by making contrasts across the data, cross-checking examples and previous conclusions in the data. I was mindful that data interpretation was both a process (the unravelling of meaning) and a product (the recording of conclusions) and that it would require not only logic and organisation but hunch and creativity in order to formulate what Denzin (1989) called 'thick description', which is:

...attempts to unravel and record these multiple meaning structures that flow away from interactional experience. It assumes that multiple meanings will always be present in any situation (1989: 102).

In order to determine what was important in my data and what was not, I drew upon a variety of strategies to aid me. I explored organising principles (the categories my respondents used to define themselves) and subtext (analysing implicit meanings) (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013:456). Most importantly, I drew upon secondary research to guide and contextualise my findings. As I drafted my preliminary findings I reflected upon a variety of questions:

- Have I gained access to the best available information?
- Am I adequately representing student views/truths?
- Am I oversimplifying the issues?
- Are my interpretations reasonable, logical and coherent?
- Do my interpretations move beyond analysis to illuminating meaning?
- Are my interpretations useful?

I was mindful to take coding notes of my reactions and ideas that emerged from the interviews. At times, these notes suggested new interpretations, as well as connections with other data. Invariably my notes pointed toward questions and issues for me to look into as I coded and collected more data. This process gave me a series of conclusions which I could synthesise to form my findings chapters.

### **3.8.3 Quality of the qualitative data**

In their seminal work in the 1980s Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four criteria for judging the soundness of qualitative research and explicitly offered these as an alternative to more traditional quantitatively-oriented criteria. They felt that their four criteria better reflected the underlying assumptions involved in much qualitative research. In their early work the central concept was trustworthiness. The four criteria for this were: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. They were each a parallel of traditional criteria used to judge quantitative research: internal/external validity, reliability and objectivity.

Within these were specific methodological strategies for demonstrating qualitative rigour, such as the audit trail, member checks when coding, categorising, or confirming results with participants, peer debriefing, thick description, negative case analysis, structural corroboration, and referential material adequacy (Guba and Lincoln 1981 and 1982 and Lincoln and Guba 1985). Central to this was also the characteristics of the investigator, who must be responsive and adaptable to changing circumstances, holistic, having professional immediacy, sensitivity, and ability for clarification and summarisation (Guba and Lincoln 1981). I discuss below how I applied some aspects of these criteria in my research.

#### Credibility

This criterion involves establishing that the results of qualitative research are credible or believable from the perspective of the participant in the research. Since from this perspective, the purpose of qualitative research is to describe or understand the phenomena of interest from the participant's eyes, the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results (Guba and Lincoln 1981). This was vital for my research as it centred upon providing analyses of my respondents' experiences from their points of view. In order to achieve this I used

the following techniques: member checks (these occurred during my return visits to the individual sites) and peer debriefing (I discussed my data whilst I was data collecting with colleagues at work who were also involved in internal and external research projects).

### Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalised or transferred to other contexts or settings. According to them, transferability was:

The thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 136).

I approached my research with the intention to provide thick descriptions of the sense of the emotions, thoughts and perceptions of my research participants' experiences. I sought to build up clear pictures of the individuals and groups meanings, interpretations and intentions in the context of their culture and the settings in which they learned. In order to achieve this, I utilised some of the methods suggested by Ponteretto (2006): such as the use of long quotations, contextual description and a non-judgmental approach to interviewing.

### Dependability

The idea of dependability emphasises the need for the researcher to account for the ever-changing context, within which research occurs. The researcher is responsible for describing the changes that occur in the setting and how these changes affected the process and the product of the research (Lincoln and Guba 1985). I used structural corroboration as a method in this case which involved a triangulation of data, interviews and observations and a triangulation of methods, interviews, group interviews and observations in order to increase the likelihood that I was capturing the situation from a variety of viewpoints



### Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others. It can also be defined as 'accuracy' and/or:

the extent to which the auditor (*researcher as accountant?*) examines the product, the data, the findings, interpretations and recommendations and attests that it is supported by the data and is internally coherent so that the bottom line may be accepted (1985: 318).

At the end of the study I conducted a data audit trail in order to examine my data collection and analysis procedures and make judgements about the potential for bias or distortion. This included interview notes, summaries, field notes and observation notes (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

### **3.8.4 Ethical considerations**

In qualitative research settings, it is widely acknowledged that the researcher has power over the researched within the research relationship (Hammersley 2001). There is recognition of bias in terms of power which need to be corrected in research not only in terms of who the gatekeepers of knowledge are but also in terms of which objective facts are selected and which ones are excluded.

Generally, it is the case that researchers uphold a monopoly of interpretation over the subjects' statements, and enjoy the privilege of interpreting and reporting what the subjects really meant (Atkins and Wallace 2012). I was aware that having taught some of my respondents very briefly several years ago there was a danger that some of them could still see me as their 'teacher' and relate to me as a 'figure of authority' and simply provide me with the answers they believe that I am seeking (Fine 1994).

I was also cognisant of my own biases in relation to the selection of facts having also been disengaged from mainstream education whilst I was a teenager and thus was mindful to ensure that I reported faithfully their experiences to avoid 'confirmation bias' (Atkins and Wallace 2012: 142).

Most research now takes into account issues of ethics and safeguarding and requires researchers to provide information and transparency with regards to the purpose and intended outcomes of the research, procedures in place to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, as well as clearly communicating to participants the risks or benefits of the research (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

### Safeguarding

I was very aware of the importance of safeguarding when conducting my research. Safeguarding is a relatively new term which extends beyond the definition of 'child protection'. As well as referring to protection, safeguarding also encompasses the notion of prevention. The main purpose of safeguarding is to ensure that children are kept safe and grow up in circumstances most likely to promote this. Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children is defined as:

protecting children from maltreatment; preventing impairment of children's health or development (NCB 2013: 7).

Children are defined as individuals under the age of 18 and thus, research involving children gives rise to particular sensitivities, such as consent, confidentiality and anonymity and privacy.

### Informed Consent

Normally consent to a child's participation in research should be obtained from the person with parental responsibility as well as the participant themselves. In the case of those participants under the age of 18 used in my research, parental consent was obtained. I also worked in accordance with the BERA's code of conduct (BERA 2004). Verbal and written permission was obtained from the senior managers of each institution (Appendix K). I ensured that all participants who volunteered experienced a fair distribution of benefits and burdens. I was cognisant that the underpinning idea was to 'best accomplish social justice' (Savin-Baden and Howell Major: 333: 82).

### Confidentiality

Research participants need to understand how far they will be afforded anonymity and confidentiality, and the extent to which their privacy will be respected and protected. I followed National Children Bureau research guidelines (NCB 2013) and was cognisant about the issues relating to confidentiality. All data was anonymised after transcription and separated from the original notes or recordings to prevent identification. All respondents selected their own pseudonyms which were known only to me and themselves. They were also the only individuals allowed access to their own data. They were assured that the data would only be published in an anonymised form and that it would only be used for research purposes. I knew full well that in some exceptional situations confidentiality may be broken and information disclosed where this is in the public interest to do so. I also made my respondents aware that there must be limits to any guarantee of confidentiality or anonymity in situations where child protection is an issue. I was aware that:

where a child or young person divulges that they or others are at risk of significant harm, or where the researcher observes or receives evidence of incidents likely to cause serious harm, the researcher has a duty to take steps to protect the child or other children (NCB 2013: 12)

In order to fulfil their responsibilities to children, researchers need to be aware of types of abuse and possible indicators of abuse. I was aware that my role should include:

- Awareness of any relevant child protection procedures
- Recognising indicators of abuse
- Recording information/monitoring
- Discussion and/or consultation with an appropriate person
- Making a referral

### Autonomy, Beneficence and Non-maleficence

Gillon's (1994) three key principles: Autonomy, Beneficence and Non-maleficence, also underpinned my approach to research throughout the study:

In terms of autonomy, all the respondents were treated by me as self-determining individuals and were asked to give informed consent prior to the commencement of the study. I sought also to respect their autonomy by explaining verbally the nature and purpose of the research as well as the potential risks and benefits to the respondents. This was reinforced with written information before the research was undertaken, and verbally prior to each activity during the data collection process.

I explained my responsibilities as a researcher to my respondents throughout the process and gave them the opportunity to withdraw at any time. I believed this approach helped to clarify boundaries so that my respondents would not have expected me to adopt a teaching, interviewing or counselling role. This was especially important because I had previous professional involvements with two of the learners and one of the centres, which I had researched.

Beneficence and Non-Maleficence is the 'obligation to maximise benefits and minimise harm' to individuals involved in the research (Crookes and Davies 1998: 82). Key to this was the maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity.

#### Data security

I was aware of the importance of data storage regarding the issue of confidentiality. I ensured that the data whether electronic or hard copy was stored securely at home in a locked filing cabinet or external hard drive. It was shared with no one and was never removed from my house.

### **3.8.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has set out the prime ontological concepts which underpin the study and given a detailed account of the methodology in order to make transparent the process of developing potential answers to the questions and raising new questions from the answers.

I value Vidich and Bensman's 1968 conclusion that:

at best (the researcher) can feel that he has advanced his problem along an infinite path....there is no final accumulation and no final solution (1968: 396).

In the next three chapters I intend to investigate the following questions:

- Why did the learners in this study choose the Diploma above other qualifications?
- Which teaching and learning methods did they find most appropriate and why?
- Was the type of support they received on the programme significant to their experiences on the programme?

## **Chapter Four: 'It all starts at school when they tell you you're useless' (*The Neurotics*)-Decision-making and choice in post-16 contexts**

### **4.1 Introduction**

According to Unwin and Wellington (2001) there are five pathways down which young people may walk after they reach the age of 16. These are: full time education in school, sixth form college, FE college or private training provider; employment (full or part-time); government supported training programmes ; part-time education and part-time work together; or non-participation in education, employment or training. The young people discussed in this survey originally fell into the latter category of which there are about 10% nationally depending upon how the statistics are interpreted, as already discussed in Chapter Three. This figure of 'non-participation', however, tells us nothing about their individual circumstances. They may be employed in casual labour, suffering ill-health, be excluded by a mental or physical disability or be caring for a parent or their young children (Maguire 2013).

This chapter will focus on three groups of young people who have decided to return to full-time education after a break in their learning trajectories. It will discuss their previous educational experiences and the difficulties they faced in coping with an educational system that both rejected them and was rejected by them (Maguire 2008). It will then go on to show how and why they decided to resume their 'learning careers' (Hodkinson and Bloomer 2000) by enrolling upon the Diploma course and to discuss to what extent these decisions represented significant 'turning points' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1993) for them.

### **4.2 Previous educational experiences**

All of my respondents had struggled in pre-16 education. This was partly due to lack of attendance. Three quarters of them had poor attendance records, less than 65 per cent on average, exacerbated by frequent short exclusions or expulsions. Eight of the cohort had been permanently excluded from school and two of these had been excluded from more than one school (table one). Consequently, almost all of them displayed negative attitudes towards mainstream schooling in general. There were

marginal differences in attitudes between the learners across the three centres which were characterised by a mixture of self-pity, apathy, arrogance and bitterness towards the school system and individual teachers. Risky's attitude is typically confused and to some extent, self- deceiving:

*'I was lazy at school and could not get my head around the lesson. So I used to bunk. I got further and further behind so I didn't turn up. No one stopped me. They knew I was lazy so they should have given me a good kick. That's what they get paid for, isn't it? I have to blame them too, don't I?'*

Some took a more balanced view of their lack of success apportioning 'blame' equally on the system and on their own efforts. According to Femi:

*'I don't think I asked enough for help. The teachers tried with me but maybe I didn't give them enough incentive to work harder with me? It's got to be two ways, hasn't it?'*

Others criticised the curriculum and its lack of relevance to their own learning needs and future intentions. Although to some extent, this could be another learning defence to justify their own lack of interest in school. According to Carlton: *'The lessons meant nothing to my life. Like History. What do I care about the past? It's all dead people.'* Ben saw the curriculum as part of an academic progression which he believed was alien to his future prospects: *'School was all about preparing you for Uni. I never wanted to go to Uni so I could see no point in doing well at school.'* Another had 'internalised' the stereotyped characteristics embodied in the notion of learning styles perpetuated in her school (which had long been discredited by Coffield et al. 2004): *'I'm not a visual or auditory learner. I'm a natural hands-on learner so I could never do the lessons properly'* (Shannon). Another saw the curriculum as irrelevant to his future career intentions and opted out: *'I want to work in my dad's plumbing business. I don't need GCSEs to do that. So I just didn't bother to turn up'* (Pinky).

Most of my respondents argued they were continually told in school in different ways that they were 'non- academic' and to some extent, based on the discussions I had with them individually and in group interviews, this was a label they tended to internalise without demur.

Atkins (2010) called this part of the 'discourse of negativity' which surrounds young working-class learners and she stated rightly that:

'Non-academic' tends to be used as a euphemism for vocational, despite its own negative connotations. However, like other language used to describe young people on vocational education programmes and the programmes themselves, it is conflated with non-achieving and with low aspirations (2010: 257).

None of my respondents had achieved more than three GCSEs at school. Only six of the cohort had sat five GCSEs and seventeen of them sat no examinations. Four of the cohort had achieved three GCSEs passing at C, D, and E (table one). According to Payne (2004):

The results that young people expect to get in public examinations taken at age 16 play a very large part in their choice of route at age 16. Attitudes towards school and self-perceptions of ability are intimately bound together, and seem likely to be self-reinforcing. (2004: 25)

Their academic and social aspirations were mostly mixed and contradictory. Over all, most said they would have liked to have done better at school and were disappointed they didn't because they felt it would 'mess up' their futures. Three quarters of the group blamed it on their own efforts, for example, not working hard or 'bunking' and some felt that it was the result of 'not being academic enough'. Many had a low sense of the value and meaningless of the learning. According to Lave and Wenger (1991) the 'game' of education is heavily stratified and hierarchy dependent and the knowledge is tightly controlled. Nearly all my respondents were acutely aware of this and that without knowing the rules or (playing by them) it is difficult to succeed. Graham's comments exemplify this attitude:

*'At times I felt like a chess-piece on a board.-a pawn. The teachers kept moving me around from one set to another whether I did well or not. I was never too sure how to behave.'*



### 4.3 The influence of communities of practice

The values and mores of their own communities of practice were often at odds with those of the wider school community. Many felt their approaches to 'doing' school did not fit it with the dominant game. The concept of the ideal learner who is rational, committed to education and self-driven which lies in the centre of the past and present government's inclusion policy seemed to them a chimera:

*'School was all about being a 'goody good'. I never kind of fitted in. It's like you were in with the teachers or you were out. Me and my mates were out from Year Eight. If you are out, they keep the doors shut' (Risky).*

*'Of course I wanted to be a 'somebody' in school but nobody showed me the way to go. The teachers treated us like nobodies all the time so we became them. They weren't interested in showing or helping us' (Bonehead).*

They articulated clearly in group interviews what they saw as the principle defining features of the 'game'. The game of education reflected the rules and conventions of their everyday lives: *'just like life really. There are winners and losers. I was a loser'* (Danny).

The rules were not always made 'clear' to them and they could be 'bent' or re-interpreted according to who had the power or the authority to do so: *'me and my boys used to get suspended all the time for things that others would get just a warning for. It was like they wanted us to make a mistake to punish us'* (Ghost).

A part of the school's role was to socialise and teach school students the 'rules' of the wider community and life in general: *'One teacher said to me 'I'd never be a good citizen.'...I suppose he meant like my dad? To be able to take orders from adults and pay taxes?'* (Mark).

It can help if members of your family knew the 'rules' more clearly and could help support them in their playing:

*'My parents wanted me to do well at school and they used to tell me to keep my head down. They couldn't really advise me what to do because they didn't have a clue about qualifications and such' (Shannon).*

Some students were more aware, more adept and more competent at playing the game and this gave them a clear advantage:

*'Some kids knew how to suck up to teachers and become their favourites. They would always give them respect and more time. They were normally the same kids...If you didn't keep to the straight and narrow you never got the special treatment' (Carlton).*

In order to be successful you had to conform:

*'School's a bit like the Army. You have the officers who are the teachers and the squaddies-us. You have to follow their orders, no matter how dumb, to get anywhere. You can't ask questions. If you do they jump down your throat' (Cage).*

One of the difficulties some of my respondents faced whilst at school was an unwillingness or inability to adapt to the changing routines of school life. This was also reinforced by their communities of practice which helped to encourage a type of 'bunker mentality' amongst their friendship groups. According to Kiran: *'No matter how much they changed the rules; it was still me and my boys.'*

Illeris (2011) distinguished learning defences from 'learning resistance', which is an active hostility or ambivalence towards courses which are seen as irrelevant, dull or obstructive in some way (2011: 35). This can have both a positive and a negative impact as it can spur the learner on and move them forward to find new strategies for learning and development. This was definitely the case with Ciran and Chas who were the most indifferent to the Diploma programme and who were both expected by their tutors and fellow students to have dropped out by Christmas because of their previous track records in education which were characterised by indifference to study and a resistance to written course work. Both learners progressed onto the second year of the course with Merit profiles. Ironically enough, one of the tutors on the Diploma course who was quick to brand Ciran in this way also displayed the same attitudes during his first year of the PCE on which I taught him. This type of learning resistance is not simply the preserve of younger learners.

Spielhofer et al (2008) suggested that learning resistance can also be affected by the weight that learners place on extrinsic immediate rewards. According to their survey of young people about to make decisions about their future post-16 those learners who 'place more importance on immediate monetary gain are more likely to become

non-learners after leaving Year 11' (2008: 59). A small number of my interviewees were in accord with this view before they started the Diploma course. According to Danny:

*'Another course was the last thing on my mind. I just wanted to get to work as soon as I could and make some money.'*

They emphasised that this is not because they were unaware of the financial support available to them but rather a matter of choice. Since the survey in 2008, Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), the main financial support package, had been scrapped from 2011 which has proved to be a financial barrier to many young people who would have liked to progress onto Further Education. According to Payne (2004): 'There is much evidence that attitudes towards school tend to become more negative as young people progress through secondary education' (2004: 28). She suggested this involved a slow process of disenchantment and resistance, which can lead to an end-point in the individual's school career where they decide to disengage completely.

#### **4. 4 Post-16 decision-making**

Much research has shown that various structural and cultural phenomena such as opportunity structures, classed and gendered expectations, opportunity contexts, mainly labour market and neighbourhood; educational attainment and parents social class and cultural and economic capital impact upon young people's occupational aspirations and expectations (Marini and Greenberger 1978; Furlong 2009; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Furlong et al. 1996; Bloomer et al. 2000 and Roberts 2004). Many of the vocational aspirations and identifications of the young people who were about to return to education in this study were 'shaped' under these conditions and thus, their horizons for action (Hodkinson et al.1996) were quite discernible in interviews. The following comments from group interviews suggest that for many, their social-spatial-temporal horizons were clearly visible.

Some of the young people showed awareness of local employment conditions:

*'There's nothing really out there. Looking for jobs is pointless'* (Cage). Others saw a return to education as a positive step out of their current static life situation; *'I needed*

*to get off my arse really. I was spending too much time on my PS2 (PlayStation 2)* (Darren). For others there was a sense of urgency to change things: *'This was my last chance to get things right. If I messed this up, that's it – nothing left'* (Jake). Others showed a clear understanding of the constraints their social and economic backgrounds placed upon them: *'None of my family have done a lot with their lives. I wanted to be different. I wanted a good job, decent car, nice holidays. I needed qualifications to get these things.'*(Risky). *'I'm a care kid that's bottom of the bottom of the pile. Without qualifications that's where I'll be for the rest of my life'* (Show-off). *I was born in Dagenham, went to school in Dagenham, live in Dagenham. I'll die here unless I get a proper trade and get out'* (Frankie). *'If you have nothing, you can't go anywhere in this world. It's really harsh'* (Milky).

#### **4.5.1 Turning points**

In Hodkinson et al's (1996) study of the career decisions amongst young learners they also identified a number of 'turning points' which caused the young people in their survey to change direction and exert some agency in spite of the major social and cultural constraints which helped to determine their choices. According to Unwin and Wellington (2001: 32): 'Some of these are initiated by the young people themselves; others are forced upon them and others may cause them unexpectedly to reappraise their situations'.

Some of the young people in my sample also experienced significant turning points which prompted their decisions to return to education. In Shannon's case it was a new imperative to help her family financially:

*'My dad had worked hard all his life as a builder but he had an accident falling off a roof and hurt his back. He couldn't work after that so we were living off his disability benefit. I realised that I couldn't sponge off my family anymore so I decided to get my shit together and start looking at apprenticeships first of all to get a career and start helping out my family with money.'*

Darren's decision to return to education was triggered by the departure of his previous social services case worker:

*'In the Summer I got a new case worker. I didn't like her at first because she was much more pushy than my old one. She kept going onto to me all the time about how*

*I was wasting my life and how I should get myself a future. She kept on showing me courses and jobs. In the end I gave in and started applying for things just to get her off my case and to shut her up.'*

Imran decided to return because his original career choice, working in retail was proving to be blocked to him by his lack of qualifications:

*'I had always been good at sports at school .I always wanted to work in a sports shop. But I messed up big style at school and flopped all my exams. I applied to loads of places but they weren't interested because I didn't have the qualifications. One day my dad said to me: 'Get real and go back to college'. The next morning I realised that finding my ideal job was a myth and I started looking at courses.'*

Dan started looking at courses as a result of a change in his social circle:

*'I suppose the big turning point for me was when my mate went down for shottin weed. He got eight months which really made me depressed. I was on a downer for about six months. I didn't want to see anyone and went into myself. I smoked a lot over that period and started looking at my future. I couldn't see anything so I thought I would get out of the hole by making a big new fresh start to my life so I looked around to go back to college.'*

Patrick was encouraged to return to education by the efforts of a persistent teacher from the alternative education sector:

*'Miss Olivea just turned up at my new carers house one day. They had set up the meeting with her and she was sitting down in the living room when they called me out of my room. I had never met her before and first of all, I didn't want to speak to her so I just walked out the room and went back to my bedroom. I was really pissed off at the way they were trying to push me into something I didn't want to do. Next week she came back but I decided to listen to her for half an hour just for the sake of my carers really. She seemed really keen for me to join the course and kept telling me how talented I was and things like that and how I could become a mentor and get paid by her if I proved myself. She made me think that I could do something with my life if I took a chance. She was really the main reason why I decided to apply.'*

#### **4.5.2 The role of Information Advice and Guidance**

Whilst much of the recent research into educational decision-making has developed methodologically from the recognition that choice is dependent on personal histories, and interpretations of the influence of implicit and explicit socio-economic and cultural pressures, one of the key recommendations made in many reports regarding decisions to participate in education post-16 relates to the importance of providing detailed information about options and choice of courses during Information Advice

and Guidance (IAG) sessions (Hodkinson and Sparkes (1993); Foskett and Hesketh (1997) and Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001). Without this, it is argued learners wallow in a sea of ignorance and uncertainty (Foskett and Hesketh 1997).

The crux of the argument is that individuals also make choices based entirely upon self-interest and that these choices are entirely rational and made after a process of committed information gathering in order to weigh up the costs and benefits of a variety of courses of action before making a decision. Thus in an educational context, learners would need appropriate levels of information in order to make a logical assessment of the potential returns obtainable from enrolling on a particular course. This particular model has been critiqued for its lack of appreciation of the notions of social class, gender, educational background and achievement and course status (Foskett et al. 2001).

My respondents claimed they did not receive much information from their schools about their post-16 options nor did they suggest they had any inclination for vigilant information collection. (This is not uncommon amongst pre-16s, however. I know from my own experience of working with this age-group in schools across a variety of levels of ability and commitment to education that the belief that 'it'll work itself out' is very prevalent).

#### Knowledge of vocational options

Twenty-seven of the respondents, however, had some knowledge of vocational courses. Twenty-two of them attended schools where vocational GCSEs were being offered, mainly in Construction and Hair and Beauty and the others had friends who were currently enrolled on BTEC courses in FE. They demonstrated a variety of attitudes towards vocational courses in group discussions. Two thirds of them were clearly in support of them in principle. For example, War Kid said: *'They are for practical people like me. They will help me find a good job in the future'*. Some were slightly fearful of them because they had heard that they were more difficult to pass than academic qualifications: *'I was told there was a lot of theory to them and they were harder to pass'* (Sam). There were those who were slightly suspicious of them, thinking they were 'inferior' to other courses: *'They are for the thickies like me.... The kids who struggle with proper courses and can't be controlled in class'* (Darren).

One learner thought they would have narrowed his future career options if he had gone on one: *'If I did say a course in Carpentry and I changed my mind about wanting to be a chippie then I would have been stuck, wouldn't I?'* (Mark). Another learner, basing his judgment upon what his father had told him was initially very dismissive: *'My dad said they are a waste of time. You can only learn a trade on the job, not in a classroom'* (Shannon).

With regards to the Diploma the majority of the learners had little real understanding of its content and its implications before they commenced the course. This was not surprising as by their own admissions most of the people they discussed it with had little detailed knowledge themselves. This became clear to me from their initial responses in the opening group discussions in January 2011. Their awareness of the significance of the Diploma was naturally mixed.

Two thirds of the respondents believed that it would qualify them for a trade and monetary success. For some this had been reinforced by the advice given by careers teachers, parents and other adults. It was also explained to them as an 'alternative' to the 'academic' qualifications which they had studied at school. They claimed that they were never properly briefed about the 'real' course - neither content nor its progression routes. Only one of the respondents had heard of the Diploma and his recollection was vague, based on *'something I heard on the news'* (Dan). This was obviously in spite of a £20m advertising campaign launched by the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) in 2009.

#### **4.6 Motivations to enrol on the Diploma**

As a consequence of this the students had very mixed motivations towards the Diploma that reflected the range of influences that played upon their decisions to enrol on the programme. For one third of the respondents the key influence was family, in particular, parental advice. This was particularly the case with learners who attended Leon College. These learners also tended to be the ones amongst my respondents who were under most pressure to succeed on the course. It is possible that their parents may have been the most motivated in the group but because they did not form part of the research they were never interviewed.

Three quarters of this cohort said they were 'encouraged' by their parents. For some this was direct pressure exerted by their fathers: *'I was given no choice. Join the course, do something with your life or get out my house'* (War Kid). For others it was more subtle persuasion: *'I was reminded that I had no qualifications and that this was my last chance'* (Sam).

This is in line with other research. According to Payne (2004):

Parents are also probably the most important source of advice and help when decisions about post-16 routes have to be taken. Maychell and Evans (1998) found that when Year 11 students in their national survey were asked who they talked to about their careers plans, parents were named far more often than friends, teachers or careers advisers (2004: 27).

It is worth noting that War Kid's experience is quite uncommon as according to Payne (2004) it is unusual for parents to impose their decisions on their children with regard to post-16 participation, merely to set the parameters of choice.

Out of this group of 20 learners there were also those who were satisfied with their parents as a source of advice, deeming it impartial and helpful to them in making up their minds. (This was in spite of their apparent lack of detailed knowledge about the Diploma). Eight of the respondents said their parents were enthusiastic about the idea of the Diploma, its vocational nature and saw it as a first step on the ladder to a proper career for their children;

*'My parents didn't know any more than me about the Diploma but it was good to get a second opinion about doing it. They were keen to get me to do it because they thought it would be my last chance to learn a trade and get a job'* (Biscuit Man). *'I looked on the website with my dad and we discussed the Diploma afterwards. It was totally new to him too. He wasn't normally that gone on vocational qualifications because he really wanted me to do an apprenticeship but I think he was impressed by all the different options on the course....and the fact I could learn skills in different things like Bricklaying, Carpentry, Painting and Decorating. He thought this would open different doors for me'* (Shannon).

This is supported by the research of Lynch et al. who concluded:



For many of the parents, the variety of the Diploma curriculum was the main attraction, as it not only covered their child's main area of interest but combined several related subjects. Several stated that, despite their initial unease, the qualification seemed to be tailored to the needs and interests of their child (2010: 62).

For about half of the learners surveyed the key influence was advice from outside agencies, Careers Teachers, Case Workers and Connexions staff. According to some of the interviewees those who gave them advice about the Diploma often struggled with explaining it properly to them:

*'The Connexions man tried to break it down for me, but after a while he looked baffled so he gave me a leaflet to read and told me to look on a web-site. It was a waste of time I could've stayed at home and done that myself'* (Matthew).

*'My Teacher had no time for me. He said they weren't putting me into any of the exams and that I should enrol on the Diploma in September if I wanted to get qualifications. I didn't know what it was about and he seemed too busy to explain it properly to me. I think he wanted to spend more time with the kids that wanted to stay on at sixth form'* (Risky).

*'My Case Worker normally gives me good advice about what I need but she really didn't know much about the Diploma apart from it was vocational and that I could get on it without qualifications. She gave me a DVD to watch which was ok'* (Darren).

This lack of understanding of the Diploma can partly be explained by the relatively newly established nature of the course in 2009 and by the vague and often ambiguous briefing material provided for those who needed to recruit for it. One Careers Teacher told me in 2010:

*'I've read all the government briefing material from the websites and I still wasn't sure what kind of qualification the Diploma was and how it differed from traditional vocational qualifications like City and Guilds and BTECs. This really didn't help me when I had to explain their merits to the kids.'*

The role of careers advice is particularly important at post-16:

Careers professionals probably have more influence on some areas of choice at 16 than others. ....Witherspoon (1995) found that, amongst young people who stayed in full-time education, those who said that they had help from careers professionals were more likely than others to be doing vocational courses (Payne 2004: 28).

IAG for 'vocational' learners has also been criticised for its tendency to sell dreams of opportunity to young learners and not give them whole picture. Atkins (2010) is particularly caustic:

Too many young people are sold an image of vocational opportunity which is inconsistent with the reality – they are given no inkling of its exchange value in education or the workplace. In addition, many more are directed onto vocational programmes based on superficial or transient inclinations towards particular activities or occupations (2010: 260).

The paucity of detailed information about the Diploma which my respondents commented on is supported by research done by Lynch et al (2010.) According to their research into the first year of the Diploma there was a lack of consistency in IAG across the entire consortium surveyed. Two main problems were identified. Firstly, learners claimed they were only briefed about the Diploma if they asked and secondly, Year 10 learners felt they needed to be told more about particular areas of the Diploma, e.g. the need to travel across sites and the role of Functional Skills in the Diploma (The latter is an issue which I intend to discuss in chapter five with regard to my own respondents).

They suggested that the main reasons learners in general were attracted to the Diploma was because it was: specialised and career-related; equivalent to other qualifications, such as GCSEs or A levels; interesting; something different from their other academic qualifications; a different way of learning; a possible entry route into HE or University and the opportunity to try a new and different type of course (Lynch et al. 2010: 29)

During the initial group interview discussions my respondents said the Diploma programme attracted them because it was vocational. Over three quarters of them cited this as the main reason they enrolled. Two thirds of them cited this as the main reason. This seemed to reflect their general antagonism towards what they saw as 'academic' subjects which they struggled with at school and the deep seated fears that they would struggle again in these areas in a different educational context. This was in spite of their general mixed feelings towards other vocational qualifications.

What seemed to make this qualification different to them was that it was relatively new and therefore somehow better. According to Bonehead, the Diploma seemed more 'down to earth' than other courses:

*'I wanted to do something to do with the real world. I didn't want to waste more time learning about a lot more theory.'*

*'I was told the Diploma course was more up to date than BTECs and brand new written by professionals. I wanted to do something that was relevant now and not thirty years ago' (Chas).*

The career-related nature of the qualification was cited by over three quarters of my respondents as the second most popular reason. The Diploma was seen by them as a pathway to work and out of unemployment. During the group discussions it also emerged that apart from two learners who had fathers in the Construction Industry, none of the others had ever considered construction as a career option. Most had previously thought about working in Retail, or the Travel Industry or in Fitness:

*'I really wanted to do an apprenticeship in Fitness and work at (a popular chain of gymnasia) but I never got the grades in the end. This was second best as it offered me a trade' (Ants).*

*'I did my work experience in a sports shop so I imagined I'd be working there in the future. This is like a new road opening for me. It had to be worth a go' (Imran).*

The practicality of the Diploma was cited as the principle reason for enrolling on the course by a quarter of respondents. It was once again seen as the antithesis of the academic courses they had struggled with at school. In particular they were drawn to a course they thought (or had been told), was very hands-on and contained 'very little writing'. This had put them off taking BTECs at school. What soon emerged after a few months on the Diploma programme was a general consensus that they had been misled on this point. There was more written work associated with the programme than they had anticipated. This provoked a variety of responses from them and had a varying impact on their motivation. This I will discuss in chapter five.

*'I was never any good at sitting down in class and listening to the teacher talking. I can't concentrate after a while and my mind wanders. I was always getting told off for this. I wanted to do a course where I could be up and doing things and learn new skills I could do with my hands' (Ghost).*

These views are consistent with the research conclusions of Marston-Smith et al. (2010) into the choices made by young learners aged 14. According to them:

in relation to choices made at age 14, evidence from our research suggests that many of the young people who chose to study for non-traditional courses (such as those offered by the IFP, Skills for Work or the Young Apprenticeships Programme), or who had opted to study the Diploma, had often chosen these because they preferred a more practical learning style, and wanted to have the opportunity to learn outside the classroom (2010: 45).

#### **4.7 Conclusions**

In this chapter I have attempted to answer my first research question: Why did the learners in this study choose the Diploma above other qualifications? From my interviews and group interviews I am able to conclude that:

- The majority of them struggled whilst at school which was the result of various personal, social, cultural, pedagogical and curricula factors
- That although in the main, their choices were constrained by personal and socio-economic factors, their decisions to return to education were also influenced by choice
- That their attitudes to vocational qualifications were mixed, ranging from mildly interested to sceptical
- That although many had some knowledge of vocational qualifications in general, they knew little about the Diploma and were advised to apply for it mainly on the advice of outside agencies and their parents. The impact of formal IAG from their schools was minimal.
- That the key attractions of the Diploma for them were that it was 'vocational' as opposed to 'academic'; that it was 'new' and based on developing practical skills and hence could lead to a 'proper career'..

In the next chapter I discuss how my respondents coped with the different approaches to teaching and learning strategies in each of their centres and to begin to evaluate the impact they had upon their motivations to learn on the Diploma course.

## Chapter Five: Teaching and Learning and the Diploma

*'A teacher's purpose is not to create students in his own image, but to develop students who can create their own image'* (unknown).

### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I intend to look at teaching and learning in the three centres under survey. This is an area that was much discussed prior to the implementation of the Diploma (O'Donnell et al. 2007; O'Donnell et al. 2009) and which prompted considerable concern. In the first instance, I intend to define the concept of Vocational Education and Training (VET) per se and then identify what are deemed to be the essential characteristics of vocational pedagogy. Having isolated what are arguably best practices within vocational pedagogy, I will apply these within the context of the three centres under investigation and analyse the responses of my respondents to them.

### 5.2. Vocational pedagogy

There is still much debate over whether VET has a distinct pedagogy rather than a shopping list of generic teaching strategies which work well within its specific context. As Michael Young (2004a) rightly suggested there are no single templates for the content, the assessment, or the teaching of a vocational course. He also pointed out that vocational courses vary amongst themselves in terms of: subject content knowledge and workplace knowledge; the degree to which the subject is established; competence or outcomes approaches to assessment; varying emphasises on transferable skills and the balance between general pedagogy and specific vocational pedagogy (Young 2004a: 4).

Young also saw the diffusely spread expertise in vocational pedagogy and assessment among institutions as problematic. Comparing universities, colleges and awarding bodies, he argued that, universities and colleges have little or no expertise in vocational pedagogy, but at least some in vocational subjects. By contrast, awarding bodies, such as the National Council for Vocational

Qualifications<sup>2</sup> (NCVQ) and *Business and Technology Education Council* (BTEC)<sup>3</sup> have expertise in vocational assessment, but little in pedagogy. 'Therefore', Young suggested, 'vocational pedagogy in each case gets lost at a time when the complex issues of bringing together off-the job knowledge and the acquisition of skills through workplace experience are recognised as increasingly important' (Young 2004a: 9).

The Skills Commission Report into Teacher Training (2010) emphasised many of the key problems with vocational teaching in general. It claimed the following:

- Subject specific knowledge was not solely sufficient for vocational teaching as vocational teachers must be more adept at how they communicate and transfer this knowledge and skills. In fact, 'vocational pedagogy remains in its infancy' (2010: 7).
- Vocational teaching required very different skills from teaching traditional academic subjects. Teachers required the ability to hold 'dynamic,' practical, active lessons with psychomotor skills development within a less traditional classroom space.

According to Illeris (2007) the key to learning skills and knowledge is the interactive dimension. Interaction is concerned with learners' engagement with learning on a local level (i.e. the classroom) and on a wider societal level which establishes the parameters of the interaction. These are both time and place dependant. The prime notions which underpin this process are action, co-operation and communication which he believed contributed to a learner's development of 'sociality' (the ability to become engaged and function in social interaction and integration in learning). I have suggested in Chapter Four the barriers to 'sociality' which the disengaged learners in my study faced whilst at school.

He suggested the main forms of interaction in learning in the broadest sense of the word are: 'perception' (which is unmediated sensory learning); transmission (the active passing on of information); 'experience' (the totality of learning as an active

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<sup>2</sup> The NCVQ was closed in 2010.

<sup>3</sup> BTEC became Edexcel and then Pearson Education

process); 'imitation' (the reproduction of activity and modelling); 'activity' (which is both motivated and actively sought) and 'participation' (within a goal-directed community of practice).

He claimed that the most profound forms of learning take place when a variety of teaching activities are used and learners are motivated by a content which is consonant with their own personal lives and their future aspirations:

the more activity and engagement (on all levels) the learner involves in the interaction, the greater the learning possibilities are.(2007: 123).

The latter point also emerged from a recent study of young learners perspectives on vocational learning. Baird et al (2010) argued the importance of:

sustaining pupils' engagement with learning through a variety of activities with students being able to make choices having a sense of ownership of their work and subjects and topics having everyday relevance (2010: 29).

This was particularly true of disengaged learners as, according to the study:

The idea of being practical was discussed by a number of disengaged learners. Students argued that they enjoyed learning whenever they could engage in hands on, practical or vocational activity. They often made the distinction between being practical and being academic ...collectively they talked about being more engaged in lessons or courses that did not mean having to spend time in a traditional classroom (2010: 33).

### The Diploma

According to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority QCA<sup>4</sup> (2009) the Diploma drew on current theories of experiential, situated and connective learning, teaching and the curriculum. It claimed that the Diploma reflected a pedagogy in which learning has intrinsic value for the individual, but is also recognised as a 'catalyst for economic competitiveness and growth', and is 'situated within a broader arena, justified by concerns for citizenship, social integration and equity'. The report emphasised its focus on experiential learning, situated learning and connected up learning (2009: 32).

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<sup>4</sup> The QCA was closed in 2010

The Diploma, in particular, demanded more situated experiential learning than academic courses. According to the Skills Commission report, vocational teaching should contextualise subject content which would present a challenge to those teachers trained in more traditional pedagogy. They argued that current Initial Teacher Training methods were not specific enough in these aspects of training (2010). This is an argument supported both by OfSTED (2009) and the Association of Colleges (AoC 2009). They maintained that the hybrid nature of the Diploma would:

necessitate a new relationship between teachers and pupils. It will require teaching methods that can connect theoretical and practical learning and then can engage learners in authentic tasks (Skills Commission 2010: 43).

Much of the research on vocational pedagogy has centred on the importance of the following: active experiential learning and interactivity; a high level of teacher specialist knowledge and the ability to make the subject relevant to learners; ownership of learning and the use of both traditional and non-traditional teaching methods (Dewey 1916 and 1938; Leach and Moon 1999; Harkin et al. 2001; Cullingford 1995; Guile and Young 2003; Young 1998 and 2004b and Huddleston and Unwin 2005).

I intend initially to focus on the respondents' general experiences of active experiential learning and interactivity, teacher specialist knowledge and relevance to learners in their three centres. I intend then to discuss areas of teaching deemed problematic in vocational education within the context of two case studies, the teaching of applied theory and the delivery of the Functional Skills components of the course.

### **5.2.1 Vocational pedagogy in the three centres**

#### *Active experiential learning and interactivity*

In this section I detail the learners' responses to the levels of active learning and teaching in their sites.



### Leon College

Learning activities in the sessions at Leon College were varied. The aggregated results indicate there were four central activities: 1:1 support, discussion, peer teaching and working from work sheets. The most common activities were 1:1 support (17% of the time) and discussion (14%) with peer teaching close behind (12%). Note-taking (11%) and listening to exposition (11%) were also common, which are obviously more teacher-centred activities. In general, learners at Leon College were involved in sessions which were mainly based on interactivity and independent learning. The level of engagement was also high which is reflected in the small amount of time learners spent 'off task' (1%).

### Learners' responses

At Leon College the majority of learners were satisfied or more than satisfied that their teachers were trying to meet all their learning needs through interactive learning. This was allied with effective use of differentiation by task and teaching approach. From my initial discussions with staff it was evident they were drawing upon their experiences from teaching disengaged young learners in other construction programmes:

*'We are always kept busy doing different things. It's never just copying down notes from a PowerPoint and writing bits of our assignments. We get to have discussions about things like the environment, do things on line and watch clips from You-Tube. It's the way I learn best, doing things' (Ryan).*

*'I always finish early so Steve or Chris have always got something extra for me to do, even if it's helping someone out. I don't get bored like I did at school waiting for everyone else to finish' (Cage).*

*'I don't ever feel like I'm bottom of the class in the classes. We're always doing different things and some things like I.T. I'm good at so they let me work more on it. Every day we do something different so it doesn't feel like the same old same old in school' (Danny).*

### Leartrade

The majority of lesson time at Leartrade was spent on only three activities: Note-taking, listening and PC research. The three most common were listening (19%) and note-taking (19%) and worksheets (19%). The lessons at Leartrade were essentially teacher-centred with a minimum of independent learning taking place

using IT either to type up notes or to complete assignments. Significantly, the amount of time learners spent 'off-task' (8%) was much greater than on the other two sites put together.

#### Learners' responses

Three quarters of the learners of Learntrade found teaching to be very didactic. They disliked the static approach which they felt allowed them no room for classroom interaction and to bring back bad memories for them of the classes in school in which they struggled. Examples of this approach which they found particularly irksome included:

*'Always asking us to copy off the whiteboard'*

*'too much explanation and not enough doing'*

*'long handouts that we had to read in class'*

*'fast demonstrations that we couldn't follow'*

*'not answering questions properly when I couldn't work out what to do'*

*'going too fast and getting annoyed when we couldn't keep up with him'*

*'using long words that we couldn't understand then getting sarcastic with us'*

Some of the learners felt the lessons were 'satisfactory' but would have preferred more support in the class. These tended to be learners who had performed slightly better in school and who felt more 'at ease' with a teacher-centred approach:

*'Teaching was what I expected really. I didn't mind it. Much like school. It would have been good to get some individual help' (Chas).*

The majority of learners indicated in interviews and group interviews they felt they were taught in a 'one size fits all' manner and not as a series of individuals within the class. This may once again have been the result of teaching inexperience. The following comments are taken from a group interview and indicate their general lack of satisfaction over the meeting of individual needs in class:

Interviewer: 'What did you make of the bricklaying class?

Matthew: *'The pace of the class was much too fast for me. He showed us how to do it but no one really followed and when we asked him to do it again, he threatened to throw us out of the class because he thought we were being disruptive'*

Appleby: *'Mick spoke too fast for me too. He rushed through the PowerPoint without stopping. I couldn't make notes that quick. When someone asked him to stop and explain something. He just said 'later'. He never did'*

Ants: *'Always s...t really. My reading is not too good. In school they said I had Dyslexia and told me to make sure that Learntrade read my statement and so they could give me the help I needed. I told the teachers at the beginning and they photo copied it. I was supposed to have coloured paper and big type fonts. During the lessons they just give me the ordinary worksheet. I couldn't really follow it properly. When I asked them about it, they just said they forgot and they would do it next time. But it never happened'*

Ciran: *'It's a good class if he likes you. Mick has his favourites in the class. When they finished first, he told them how great they were. I made a real mess of the measuring for the joint so I fell behind. Instead of stopping to help me; he just carried on to the next task. He ignored me totally'*

Mark: *'I found this class like the rest a bit of a joke. At least at school I used to have a Classroom Assistant to help me with my writing. They said they would find me someone to help me with writing notes in class, but they never did and then they said I had to wait until May'*

Chas: *'All this working on your own business is a bit of a piss take. I really like to work with other people because it helps me concentrate more. Neither Tom nor Mick let us do this very often. They say we never get any work that way because all we do is mess around. I know I would work better in a group or just a pair'*

Bonehead: *'I find most of the practical work pretty easy because it's just like the stuff I did in Design and Technology. I always finish before everyone else. I asked Tom what to do next and he just said wait until everyone else has finished so I started to text someone and he got annoyed with me and sent me out of the room for a bit. I got punished for finishing first'*

### Inspire

Learners at Inspire had the widest variety of learning experiences. The five most common activities were peer teaching, 1:1 support, individual research and investigation, Research on PCs and Discussion. The lessons were predominantly learner-led which is evidenced by the fact that the most prominent activities at Inspire over the period observed were peer help (20%), 1:1 support (17%) and

Individual research and investigation (17%). The role of the teacher and peer mentors were to support and facilitate the independent and interactive learning taking place in class. The level of engagement was also high, but marginally lower than at Leon College, with time spent 'off task' at two per cent.

#### Learners' responses

Co-operative learning and social inter-action was encouraged in Inspire through the usage of their three peer mentors. The peer mentors' roles were to support learners in their tasks by developing their cognitive skills and their self-confidence through listening, advising and encouraging their mentees both in the classroom and outside. I intend to discuss this in more detail in the next chapter. They also served to trigger collaboration amongst learners by organising 'study buddies' for learners and small group workshops. All of the group were very appreciative of their work. Ben's comments are representative of the group:

*'Chantelle has made a big difference to me on this course. She's like my right arm. She makes notes for me, explains things when I don't know what they are on about. Takes me outside when it gets a bit much for me. She's also found me other people in the class to work with who have similar problems to me. We sort of work here like a family'*(Ben).

Nearly all the learners in this group felt they played an active role in their learning. They felt that their skills were being developed in a very structured way and at a consistent pace. Learners at Inspire, felt involved in a collaborative relationship with their lecturers which enhanced their feelings of ownership of learning. They felt they were given 'responsibility' for their own learning which they felt contrasted with their school experiences where they were 'just given orders'. From the group interview discussions and interviews a sense of learner empowerment was evident. This seems to have been partly the result of the use of staff support and partly the result of their usage of clearly defined, goal-directed objectives and targets. I intend to discuss the process in more detail in the next chapter. The impact of these was clear for many of the group:

*'Nothing is given to us on a plate. But I feel like I'm working hard and learning every lesson'* (Patrick).

*'We get treated like adults here. They let you make your choices on how you want to behave. I used to bunk a lot and I would get a bollocking for it and just carry on. Here, they say it's up to you. So I can't see any point in missing lessons. I'm only ruining my own education'*(Mile End).

### Subject specialist knowledge

Subject specialist knowledge lies at the centre of vocational pedagogy (Harkin 2010). In their initial report on the Diploma (OfSTED 2009), OfSTED were concerned about the lack of expertise of staff to teach certain elements of the qualification. Although the subject specialist knowledge of lecturers in each centre was deemed to be high by all learners, this was not enough to produce uniformly engaging lessons.

### Leon College

Nearly all the learners from my respondents agreed that all three staff members at Leon College that taught them were highly competent. In spite of the fact they were all relatively new teachers, recruited in the last five years, they had a combined industrial experience of over 22 years in Bricklaying, Carpentry and in Painting and Decorating. This industrial experience gave them 'credibility' in the eyes of some of my respondents because they had 'bin there and dunnit'. It also helped to create a new concept of a 'teacher', and indeed of education and training, in their minds. Their previous understanding of a teacher as a highly intelligent middle class academic who had lost touch with the real world was challenged, in some cases for the first time, which began to lay the foundations of a new 'respect' for teachers based on their biographies and trade experiences. When asked what they felt about their teachers in a group interview, these are some of their descriptions of the lecturers:

*'Chris sounds just like one of the lads. He is always telling us stories about what it was like on the site when he was 16. I like listening to him because he knows the job inside out because it's been his life. There isn't anything he doesn't know about the job and when he tells me what I'm doing wrong I believe him'* (Risky).

*'When Steve came in on the first day to teach us I thought he was a workman. He's not like a school teacher. He's a tradesman who teaches. He only became a teacher because he did his back in. He talks to us like we're his apprentices and not students on a college course. Most of my teachers at school chatted s...t and I never listened because they didn't know anything apart from what came from their books. You have to respect someone who left school at 15 with no qualifications and became a qualified Carpenter and then a real teacher'* (Danny).

*'Mike still works as a brickie during his holidays so I know he's not out of touch with the building trade. He's always showing us the new ways to do things and he's always taking the piss out of the syllabus which he says is a 100 years out of date. He is really critical when we do something wrong but I know that he always knows what he's talking about' (War Kid).*

### Learntrade

Learntrade employed two teachers; both of whom had recently qualified with the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector (DTLLS). They were both experienced builders but had never taught before apart from on their course placements. They both admitted to me they were concerned about teaching teenagers as their previous experience had been working with adult learners. They had not received any formal training on teaching the Diploma but had 'worked through the literature' before the programme which they admit they found 'a bit confusing'. Their lack of confidence in teaching was also detected by the learners at Learntrade.

Many of the learners felt frustrated at what they perceived to be a lack of organisation in the course. During the first few weeks some lessons started late or were cancelled, some enrolment forms were lost and there were changes in the timetable. These were to be expected in the first few weeks of a new term and the launching of a new programme but they only served to irritate some of the learners and to create the impression that no one was in control. This raised doubts in some of their minds about the quality and professionalism of some of the teaching they were receiving. Many of them expressed disappointment over this as they had been led to expect much more from the new programme and the centre. These remarks are representative of many of the learners' comments made to me during interviews and group interviews:

*'I feel kind of sorry for Tom and Mick really. I'm sure they are good at their jobs, but they really haven't got the faintest idea about teaching' (Matthew.)*

*'They obviously know their stuff but couldn't really teach it' (Chas).*

*'I can't knock them for their experience because they've been builders for years but I never thought they were real teachers. Like they never seemed professional if you get what I mean?' (Bonehead).*

*'I think that people can explain things properly and some can't. And they just couldn't to me anyway. I just didn't get it half the time' (Mark).*

*'Most of the time they just talk and I can't follow them so I fall asleep like in school' (Tiny).*

*'All this bad mess got me thinking, 'have I made the right decision to come back?'' (Appleby).*

Some learners at Learntrade seemed to feel lost or disempowered during static teaching sessions: *'I never know what I'm doing from one lesson to another and I don't think they do either' (Ciran). 'It's like they are making it up from one day to another' (Tiny). 'I never really knew what I was doing from one lesson to the next. It was like school but worst' (Ants).*

### Inspire

Inspire employed two lead teachers who had only qualified in the summer of 2010 and three peer mentors, aged 19-21, who were all Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (PTLLS) qualified. Each peer mentor had specific learners to support in class and a 'floating' support role.

The two lead teachers had previously worked with young disengaged learners whilst unqualified for two years and had some experience in youth work and in basic counselling. In spite of their lack of traditional resources, the Inspire team seemed to me to be the most confident in their ability to deliver the programme to disengaged learners:

*'They all seem to know what they are talking about and best of all, they can break things down for me so I always know what I'm doing' (Show-off).*

*'I guess I would call them (the teachers) double smart. They all know their subject inside out and they know the best ways to keep us working really hard' (Ghost)*

*'When they tell us something we all stop talking and listen to them. They are all experts who have just come out of industry who are only telling us things for our own good. They are nothing like my teachers at school who used to go on about nothing' (War kid).*

*'I just want to know everything that they know. I want to be a sponge' (Mile End).*

### Subject relevance

The Greater London Authority (GLA) report of 2007 (GLA 2007) emphasised the importance of re-motivating young people through making their vocational education and training relevant to their needs and future aspirations.

### Leon College

Many of the learners at Leon College felt that what they were learning was relevant to their futures. This was partly because they believed in the 'authenticity' of their tutors and partly because the team worked hard at explaining the 'whys':

*'The tutors are always clear how things go together for me. I know that everything I learn from them is always for a reason even if I don't get it at the time'* (Danny).

*'When I say I don't understand why we are doing it this way, Steve explains it and I know that he normally knows what he is on about'* (Andy).

*'The course gives you a taste of everything. You get to learn the basics in lots of different skills and then you can go on and specialise. I know that I'm going to learn a lot from this course'* (Biscuit Man).

*'I think that every skill I learn will be useful for my future'* (Tyrone).

### Leartrade

In contrast, some of the learners at Leartrade expressed concerns about the relevance of some of their classes. Some struggled to see the relevance of theory classes and some stopped turning up for these sessions. Many of them complained that the units were never really explained to them and that this made them uncertain about the value of the programme:

*'When we do the hands- on work, the course is good but we spend most of the time in the classroom listening and taking notes. I don't get how this is going to get me a job in the building trade'* (Graham).

Tiny: *'Mick kicked me out of the class for just asking one question yesterday.'*

Interviewer: *'Which question was that?'*

Tiny: *'The one I always keep asking. Why are we doing this? I don't see the point most of the time and they don't seem to either. When I ask them to explain what's this got to do with the assignment, they just tell me to look in the unit guide. I showed it to my dad and he didn't get it either. These things really wind me up about the course.'*



## Inspire

Many of the learners at Inspire agreed that what they were learning was 'relevant' and 'important' for their future careers. This contrasted with what many felt was the 'pointlessness' of much of their schoolwork. They were particularly encouraged by the way the course was explained to them in each session and by the usage of the workshop space for their practical sessions which made them feel they were 'really at work':

*'It's not like being at school. We're not stuck in a classroom all day. All the lessons are about real things and help to get me ready for when I get a job. The lessons don't seem a waste of time anymore so I've stopped messing around'.*(Louise).

*'I don't feel like a student at all. They all treat me like I'm training for a job. I didn't have the grades for an apprenticeship so this for me was the next best thing'* (Ben).

*'The practical stuff is really good and even the theory isn't boring at all. I surprised myself because I find it ok. We learn about important things like construction materials and job roles. They all make it interesting because it's stuff we need to know when we leave and get jobs. Everything we learn has a point to it'* (Show-off) (comments from his reflective journal).

## **5.2 Teaching and learning-applied theoretical knowledge**

### The teaching of applied theory in practical courses

This has always been deemed problematic by teachers (Illeris 2011). This is partly because vocational lecturers tend to feel more ill at ease when delivering theoretical sessions, and partly because many learners tend to be resistant to these sessions deeming them irrelevant in terms on what they think what they came on the course to learn. I have seen this many times during teaching observations. This is particularly the case with lower level learners where although the ratio of theory to practice is often lower than on a higher-level course, the resistance to learning is greater (2011:146).

In the particular case of the Diploma in C&BE, the percentage of theory to practice in the content is about 35 to 65 per cent. According to reports into the preparation for the launch of the Diploma and during its initial year (O'Donnell et al 2007; O'Donnell

et.al. 2009; OfSTED 2009), many teachers felt anxious about teaching applied theory and expressed concerns they needed extra training.

### **Case study- Health and Safety session**

I observed the same subject taught in each centre in order to analyse the ways in which the learners in different sites responded to applied theory sessions. The theme of the session was safety and its aim was to establish that safety on site was a legal obligation and help them to understand the differences between a hazard and a risk. Each session lasted 60 minutes. The session was also used by Leon College prior to a site visit. Below are descriptions of the classes taken directly from my observation notes and learners' feedback comments recorded directly after the class.

#### Leon College (12 learners)

The session began with an open question by the teacher, 'Why is safety important?' This generated a show of hands as the group provided a variety of answers. Each individual answer was written on the Smart Board and later saved on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for future reference and student access. If a learner shouted out this was dealt with politely and promptly. The teacher ensured that those learners sitting closest to him did not dominate the question and answer session by asking them to allow others to have their turn. Finally, once it was established that it was the law, the teacher outlined the legal obligations contained in the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) (HSAWA) using a PowerPoint. This section of the session lasted 20 minutes.

The learners were then given an interactive task to do on a PC in nominated pairs. They were asked to note down the main hazards from the web-based activity. The learners did this with enthusiasm whilst the teacher moved around from group to group offering advice and support when required. Those who were slow to start were encouraged by the teacher. This activity lasted 20 minutes.

In the final section of the class the learners were asked to write down hazards they had seen on the Smart Board individually. The missing answers were then displayed on the board for learners to copy into their notebooks. The group was

then asked to write down which could be avoided and which were always present as a risk. The learners' answers were then fed back to the teacher who wrote them down on the board and saved onto the VLE.

There was no time for the plenary which would have consisted of a discussion of how hazards can be reduced on a building site so learners were asked to complete this as a written task for homework to be submitted next week.

### **Learners' evaluation of the session**

Most of the learners felt this was an interesting, varied and important lesson. The range of activities and levels of interactivity were important for them. The effectiveness of the use of pair work was a recurring theme in discussions with the learners as was the opportunity to air their own opinions and be treated like an 'adult':

*'This was a boring subject that Chris made interesting by giving us a lot of different things to do' (Kiran).*

*'I enjoyed the class because I could work with Danny and we always work together well. It's much better than working on my own as I like discussing things with people first' (Shannon)*

*'I like class discussions and Chris always gives us the chance to give our own opinions. I can also understand things better that way. It's good to talk things out' (Tyrone).*

### **Leartrade (Nine learners)**

The start of the class was delayed because some of the learners were chatting amongst themselves and would not settle down. The teacher then started the class by reading from a PowerPoint outlining the provisions of the HSAWA. It was very detailed, full of information but quite dry in the usage of language. This introduction was interrupted by three learners who came in late and who were challenged by the teacher. One of the learners who seemed to have a history of lateness was told to see the teacher after the class which prompted cat-calls. The teacher continued to read from the PowerPoint asking the learners to take notes directly from it. It was a lengthy PowerPoint about 20 slides and every so often he would ask the class 'Has everyone finished? Are you ok?' The group muttered assent. The teacher read too

fast for some learners, however, and frequently he was asked to go back to a previous slide which would be met by a general groan from one group of learners in the corner. The teacher continued in this vein for about 25 minutes.

The group were then given 20 minutes to design a poster for health and safety at work from their notes showing the main hazards to be found on a building site. The learners formed three groups themselves made from friendship groups sitting together. The groups reacted differently to the task. Group One started quickly on the task prompted by their group leader. They finished within 10 minutes and then started to chat because they had nothing else to do. Group Two started more slowly as they spent time deciphering their notes which had been hastily written. They then spent time arguing over who was going to present the poster to the class. The third group, which contained three of the most disruptive learners in the class, took time to settle to the task. They sat down and chatted with each other until the teacher came across to try to motivate them. One of the group members kept asking the teacher to print off the PowerPoint so he could work from it as his notes were inadequate. In the end, the teacher spent all of his time with the group.

This section of the class overran by 10 minutes until the teacher hurriedly came to the projection screen and asked each group to present their posters at the front of the class. The learners in the first group refused to do this and would only present standing up from their seats. The poster looked rushed and messy and the words were copied verbatim from the PowerPoint. The second group was then asked to present but only one learner agreed to stand up and present at first. The other two reluctantly agreed after several minutes. The session finished before the third group could present. The teacher said they could present next week. According to the group, this never happened because the teacher had moved onto a new topic.

### **Learners' evaluation of the session**

Most of the learners were unimpressed with the session and were unable to recall what they had learned. They disliked the lack of interaction and the heavy emphasis on note-taking which they felt was 'too academic' for them. The spectre of passive school sessions reared its ugly head for them again:

*'I was bored and I day dreamed through it all. It was just like being back at school. Pointless' (Carlton).*

*'A total waste of time. I should've stayed in bed. He spoke too fast to write it down and I didn't get what the poster was supposed to be about so I couldn't be bothered to help write it' (Mark).*

*'I never get a lot done in theory classes. They are always boring like this. There's too much useless writing. Most of the time I don't go in. I wish I hadn't for this one' (Chas)*

### Inspire (12 learners)

The teaching team for the session consisted of a vocational teacher and three peer mentors, each of whom was attached to four learners. A pre-designed seating plan was in place to determine the groups which (I was informed) were differentiated according to ability to include more able and less able learners and to split up the most potentially disruptive learners from each other. The seating plan had been in place for several weeks now and when the learners arrived, they sat in their groups without hesitation. Each group was given a colour; Red, Blue, Green and Grey and each group had a pre-selected team captain. I was told these were rotated every session in order to build confidence and skills in public speaking. On each table was a short, well-illustrated and colourful handout containing information about safety on a building site that was taken from various leaflets.

The peer mentors sat with their groups as part of the teams. The teacher then explained the aims and outcomes of the session which the learners were asked to copy down. The peer mentors helped some of the students with their spelling. The opening section of the lesson was a 'hazard game-show'. Learners were shown a variety of pictured scenarios on the projection screen and asked to name the potential hazards. Each team was given a scenario to assess. If they failed to spot one in the time given, the question was passed over to the next group. The scores were written down on a whiteboard by the teacher. All the learners participated enthusiastically. The role of the peer mentors was to encourage the learners to participate and to quieten them down when they became too exuberant.

When one group started to argue with the teacher about the scoring, the peer mentor intervened and prevented the minor discord from spreading. The winning team received sweets as a prize. This section of the class lasted 20 minutes.

The transition to the next section of the lesson was swift as the teacher indicated the next task from the Smart Board which was to design a poster showing the responsibilities of either the employer or the employee to maintain safety on site. The groups were to draw upon the information on the handout. One group was given the employer, the other two the employee. Each group was prompted by their peer mentors and supported by the teacher who facilitated the work of the three groups. Each peer mentor adopted a slightly different approach to motivation. Alfie, the only male peer mentor, was slightly aggressive and badgering in his approach. Chantelle was more patient and made continuous suggestions to her group. Laura adopted an energetic enthusiastic stance. The groups were given 20 minutes to complete the task.

Each group presented to the rest of the class from the front of the room. The team captains took the lead role but each group member was required to participate. The posters were taken by the peer mentors to be photocopied and returned during the next session. The plenary lasted 10 minutes. The outcomes were reviewed via a series of nominated questions.

### **Learners' evaluation of the session**

The group appeared happy and exhilarated after the session. The session seemed to be characterised by what Harkin (2001:38) called 'leadership' and 'understanding'. There was a general sense of achievement expressed to me from most group members because of the range of activities in place and the level of classroom support given:

*'It's never boring when I come here. It's not like school because I get a chance to do fun things whilst I'm learning. Every lesson is a bit different so you never really know what to expect'*(Ghost).

*'It was a really exciting lesson. The competition was fun and it didn't feel like learning although it obviously was. Working with Alfie is always a good laugh and he explains things really well'* (Patrick).

*'I learned a lot about how important safety is in the job from this class. Why? Because it wasn't just a lot of boring information given to me. I had to find things out for myself. The teachers made it real; they brought it to life and showed why it was important'* (Show-off).

### **5.3 The teaching of Functional Skills on the Diploma**

Baird et al. (2010) argued that the presence of Functional Skills as an integral part of the Diploma was deemed to be problematic in many of the centres they surveyed. A key issue was one of achievement as, if learners do not achieve Mathematics, English and I.T. at the appropriate level of their Diploma, they would fail the entire qualification. The 'applied' nature of the content of Functional Skills was seen as a significant hurdle for learners who had been taught to learn through the academic GCSE curriculum format by many teachers in their survey (Baird et. al. 2010). This was particularly the case with Mathematics. According to the authors, many teachers were sceptical of the vocational contextualising of the tests and the lack of course work elements in the programme and hence, would have to review their entire approaches to teaching the three areas.

This issue was also commented upon by OfSTED in its review of 14-19 reforms which concluded that:

In contrast to the principal learning component of the Diploma, work in Functional Skills lacked co-ordination in just under half the consortia visited and as a result, the quality of teaching and learning varied considerably. In view of the centrality of Functional Skills within the future 14-19 curriculum generally as well as the role of Functional Skills as an integral part of the Diploma; this is a key area of development (OfSTED 2009: 4).

This is in spite of a DCSF support programme in 2008 for consortia which included as part of its focus the implementation of Functional Skills and a professional development programme for the training of staff due to teach on the Diploma (AoC 2009).

The Association of Colleges (AoC) were also concerned about learner progress in this area and suggested that:

the issue could be referred back to the Sector Skills Council for further consideration over the levels of Functional Skills required for satisfactory performance and whether any adjustment to the levels currently set would be appropriate (AoC 2009: 10).

According to the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA)<sup>5</sup>, Functional Skills was never intended to be 'bolted on' to vocational programmes but assessed and identified through learning in order to reinforce their relevance (QCDA 2011). They suggested that the teaching of Functional Skills should be underpinned by three principles:

**Appropriateness:** Each learner should have the opportunity to study the three different skills at different levels depending upon their ability.

**Integration:** Functional Skills should always be integrated whenever possible into 'real-life' vocational contexts in order to support vocational learning in Principal, Generic and Additional and Specialist units of the Diploma.

**Discrete Learning:** This involves teaching aspects of Functional Skills as 'free-standing' courses (2011: 37).

According to a study by the National Research and Development Council (Casey 2006) the most effective approach to teaching what was then called Literacy, Language and Numeracy (LLN) was the integration approach. They suggested that it had the following benefits: a rise in learner motivation to achieve LLN qualifications; higher retention in vocational courses and higher achievement in Literacy/ESOL and Numeracy qualifications. They also indicated that the most successful arrangement of teaching for Functional Skills was through an embedded team approach combining two-way mentoring between vocational and Functional Skills staff (Casey 2006). They claimed that two key factors had to be taken into account when embedding: the vocational area itself (as some areas lend themselves to embedding more than others, i.e. Construction) and the availability of support staff. In addition, they argued that learners on Level One courses were more

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<sup>5</sup> This organisation was closed in 2010



successful in achieving LLN qualifications when it was mostly or fully integrated into the main curriculum.

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS 2009) outlined four ways on a continuum in order to embed Functional skills into Diploma teaching:

*Discrete* - Functional Skills are taught as a separate entity

*Partly embedded* - Functional Skills is partly integrated.

*Mostly embedded* - Most of the content is taught through the main curriculum.

*Fully embedded* - Functional Skills are fully integrated into all teaching content.

The three centres under survey adopted different approaches to the teaching of Functional Skills: Leon College (fully embedded); Learntrade (non-embedded) and Inspire (mostly embedded).

### **Case study-Functional skills**

#### Leon College

In this centre Functional Skills was taught by all of the three vocational lecturers as part of the main content of the Diploma, one of whom had also obtained a post PCE qualification, the Additional Diploma in Teaching Numeracy as part of his professional development. The staff told me in interviews their approach was to 'camouflage' English and Maths and 'slip it undercover' into their practical and applied theory sessions in order to emphasise the importance of Functional Skills as 'real life' skills and their relevance to future employment. According to Steve:

*'It's the most logical approach in the world to me. In fact, embedding Maths is easier than English in Construction. Construction is all about numbers and measurements, quantities. So every task we set them has some number work attached to it. I struggle with Maths generally, myself and I show them you don't have to be the greatest Mathematician on the planet to work in the trade but you can't survive without a good grounding in the subject'.*

The learners in this centre mostly showed an understanding of the importance and the relevance of Functional Skills on the Diploma programme and to their future aspirations in the building trade:

*'When we started on the course it was spelled out to us that we had to do English and Maths as part of it. I wasn't too happy, I admit. I thought it was going to be like school GCSEs. But because of the way they explain how you have to use it on site, it kinds of makes sense to me'*(Danny).

*'They never say "today we're going to do maths or English". They just sought of sneak it into our lessons. It's only when I have to write down what I've learned in my ILP that it hits me that I've just done some percentages or converted inches into centimetres or whatever. It's much better that way and I think I've learned something new'* (Imran).

*'My dad always went on at me about how important it was to get Maths and English as a builder but I never really listened. Now I'm beginning to see that he might be right'* (Pyro).

From my discussions with the learners in group interviews about the teaching of Functional Skills I noticed that those learners who were most satisfied tended to be:

- Those who had struggled most in their GCSE English and Maths (half of the group had Grade Ds or had not been put forward for one or the other)
- Those that had been most fearful of learning Maths and English again after negative school experiences
- Those who felt they were receiving the most individual support.

### Learntrade

At Learntrade Functional Skills was taught for one hour per week by a specialist Basic Skills tutor. She was teacher trained and had over eight years experience in teaching Adult Basic Skills. Her sessions were designed to synchronise with those areas taught by the vocational staff who worked closely with her to design relevant activities for her sessions. For the first term, vocational lecturers sat in on her classes on several occasions. She admitted to me that teaching Functional Skills on the Diploma and to potentially disengaged learners made her 'anxious' and she felt that her lack of vocational knowledge was a distinct handicap to effective teaching:

*'I am very confident in teaching Functional Skills normally but I struggle with this group. This is partly because they are very demotivated to learn a subject they thought they had got rid of in school and partly because I don't think I know enough about Construction to make English and Maths relevant to them in spite of the efforts of the Construction team'* (Lynn).

Her anxieties were reflected in many of the comments made by learners in group interview discussions with me. There was a general consensus amongst learners that the functional skills lessons were 'not working'. They felt she was not a confident teacher with them and this led to behavioural problems in the group. Many struggled to see the relevance of the subject and some felt that they were being 'conned' by the college:

*'Lynn is a good teacher who knows her subject but I don't really get it most of the time. I can't for the life of me work out what multiplying fractions have to do with building houses?'* (Carlton).

*'No one really told us that we had to do Functional Skills as a big part of the Diploma. If they had, I don't think I would have gone on the course. I came here to learn Construction. It's like doing two qualifications at once. Nothing to do with the Diploma. It's just what the government says we have to do. I don't believe that Lynn thinks there's any point to it, either?'* (Mark).

*I try not to mess around in Functional Skills but I don't know why I'm there. I'm sure I don't need to know everything in detail about Maths and English to get a job on a site'* (Ants).

When I observed one of her classes where a vocational lecturer was 'sitting in' I noticed that the group was far less restless and far more focussed on their work because they could ask the vocational lecturer questions about how their learning could be applied to the building trade.

### Inspire

Inspire used a multi-team approach to their teaching of Functional Skills. Functional Skills was taught both as part of the main content of the Diploma and for the majority of the time, separately in two hours per week sessions. They used two lecturers in each session, a Construction Lecturer and a Basic Skills Lecturer. They were supported by two peer mentors. The sessions were jointly planned but led by the Construction Lecturer. The Basic Skills Lecturer focussed on working on an individual basis with learners to reinforce learning. The peer mentors were there to assist learners who were struggling. According to Emmanuel, their main Construction Lecturer:

*'We complement each other's skills very well. My role is to set out a practical activity which centres on one or more of the Functional Skills. Olivia provides them with the*

*'nitty-gritty' help in understanding how to apply the skills to the task. We work in tandem. It doesn't work so well without the other person'.*

The learners in this cohort appeared to be the most committed to Functional Skills of all the centres. In group interview meetings, they expressed most satisfaction with: their understanding of the relevance of Functional Skills; the style of team teaching; the level of advice and support they received during the sessions and their advanced level of understanding of Functional Skills, especially Mathematics. The following comments are representative of those made by this particular group:

*'Why are they important? If you asked me before I started the course, I would've said 'no idea'. Now, I know I couldn't do the job without them' (Patrick).*

*'I like doing them because I'm being taught Maths and English properly. The two teachers work as a team. It's nothing like being at school. The activities help with the rest of the course work. I used to find Maths really hard but now, it's not that bad' (Ghost).*

*'I need a lot of help with Maths. I was so bad at school that they refused to enter me for it. I had no interest in it. Now I've got three teachers teaching me Maths. I feel much better about it and I have more confidence than I did before' (William).*

Another factor which may have contributed to the learners' satisfaction was that unlike at the other centres where Functional Skills were taught in standard classrooms, most of Inspire's Functional Skills sessions were taught in a workshop. This may have limited teaching options, for instance, e-learning was not possible, but may have served to enhance the vocational relevance of the subjects by situating them in a 'real-life' context, a strategy encouraged by OfSTED (2009).

#### **5.4 Conclusions**

In this chapter I sought to investigate how my respondents coped with the different approaches to teaching and learning strategies in each of their centres and to begin to evaluate the impact they had upon their motivations to learn on the Diploma course. The detailed analysis of the experiences of my respondents served to confirm the significance of active teaching methods; the importance of empowering learners and relevancy in learning in engaging disengaged learners.

Active experiential learning had been rated highly by OfSTED (2009) and also by learners across all centres. Active learning in vocational subjects was also promoted by the Skills Commission (2010) and claimed by Baird et al. (2010) to be the key to motivating disengaged learners. It is enhanced by a mixture of interactive teaching methods and by the simulation of 'real life' in a classroom context. From the discussions with all the learners surveyed it seemed clear that learners preferred to be taught using less traditional methods. In particular, they enjoyed: a variety of teaching methods; kinaesthetic activities; small group work; opportunities to discuss in class and different methods of support.

Learners in Leon College and in particular, Inspire, often commented to me in interviews and group interviews how these teaching methods contrasted with the 'dry' didactic methods they were used to at school. They enjoyed the variety of activities and learners at both ends of the learning spectrum were enthused by having their personal learning needs met for the first time. Leartrade was found to be the centre that used more teacher-directed and less differentiated methods which were less satisfactory for their learners. It was also the centre where learners most often expressed discontent, especially in the teaching of applied theory and in particular, Functional Skills.

According to the respondents, the teachers at Leon College and Inspire treated them like adults and not school children using a variety of methods utilised to develop personal relationships with them (Harkin 2006). The learners felt this gave them a status and respect they had never been given before and made them feel like they had to take responsibility for their own learning. They claimed that this motivated them and enhanced their feelings that the Diploma was a new and more engaging learning experience for them. At Leartrade some of the respondents felt like they nothing had changed for them and that they were treated like they were back at school. This impacted on their attitudes to learning and their behaviour in class.

When the relevance of the learning was made clear to learners, they tended to respond more positively to the task. Many learners at Leon College and Inspire rated this aspect of the teaching very highly and argued that this helped to give them hope about their prospects for a future career. According to them, even the teaching

of Functional Skills was less problematic when it was taught contextualised within the subject specialism of the building trade. By contrast, some learners at Learntrade found many of the session irrelevant and questioned whether the Diploma was the right course for them.

In the next chapter I will analyse the experiences of my respondents to the various types of learner support they received in the three centres.

## Chapter Six-Responding to Learners' needs? -Tutorial provision in the three centres

### 6.1. Introduction

'We know that the initiation of ...learning rests not upon the teaching skills of the leader, not upon scholarly knowledge of the field, not upon the programmed learning used, not upon lectures and presentations, not upon an abundance of books, though each of these might be utilised as an important resource. No, the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities that exist in the personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner' (Rogers 1968: 197).

Morris et al (2007) have identified three main categories of support based upon two notions- support for the learner and support for learning. These consist of: the extent to which the support provided was part of, close to, or separated from learning; support that is an adjunct to learning; and non-learning support (2007: 28).

Although there is much evidence to suggest that personalised support for young learners can be an effective means of motivating them and developing their own senses of self-efficacy (Nias 1999; Solomon and Rogers 2001; Clow 2001; Salisbury et al. 2006; Birdwell 2011 and Harking 2012), some researchers are divided over how effective tutorial systems are in supporting the needs of disengaged learners. Firstly, there is conflict between the 'professional' desire to aid the learning of students and the 'managerial' imperative for scrutiny and evidence that educational tasks have been carried out by the lecturers' (Fertig 2003: 29). Secondly, the emphasis on learner support in Further Education rather than supporting learning could also be problematic. This approach assumed that most learners are largely 'self-actualising' learners, which is often an over-simplification of the case in post-compulsory education (Eccelstone 2009).

Thirdly, some teachers/lecturers do not fully appreciate the difference between their learning and learner support functions and, therefore, do not know how to exercise them most effectively (Morris et al 2002). Fourthly, according to Colley (2003), the uses of individual tutoring/mentoring schemes are also flawed because they equate to attempts to reform young people's attitudes, values and behaviours as part of managerialist employability discourses which 'target aspects of the person and give

them meaning in relation to external objectives determined by the interests of dominant others, not in relation to each other' (2003: 94).

Finally, in Kate Bowers 2006 paper, '*Personal Tutoring - ought we to dispense with the pastoral element*'? She argued against the pastoral side of tutoring completely and suggested that it should be dispensed with and replaced by a greater emphasis on academic and learning issues. She claimed that the pastoral role is anachronistic and problematic because of the 'asymmetrical distribution of power' in the learner-tutor relationship and driven by the market place imperatives of control and retention and achievement (Bowers 2006: 7). She concluded with the assertion that:

There is clear scope for dispensing with the pastoral role of personal tutoring and that instead, the activity should focus on programme and discipline specific issues which are relevant to the students' learning and professional career (2006: 10).

In this chapter I intend to investigate how the learners in the three centres were supported on the Diploma programme. In the first instance, I will analyse the three main models of tutorial provision situated in the centres. Then I will explore the views of the learners themselves in relation to the support they received. Finally, I will evaluate the effectiveness of each centre's approaches to absenteeism and learners 'at risk' through the experiences of three sets of learners.

## **6.2 Models of tutorial provision in FE**

Tutorial systems in FE are often amorphous and often defined by their local contexts, however, some researchers have identified three main models of provision (Chandler 2001; Owen 2002 and Cook 2006). These are: the personal tutor model; the action planning model and the learning development model. Each of these models is different in terms of their underlying principles and each varies in their appropriateness for use according to the demographics and needs of the student population (Bowers 2002).



### **The personal tutor model**

This is mainly a personal pastoral/parental enrichment model concerned solely with the development of general academic, social and cultural skills. It is said to be found more commonly in school sixth forms, sixth form colleges and universities.

According to Chandler:

The key to an effective personal tutorial system lies in the quality and commitment of the individual tutors and the nature of the relationship with their students (2001: 25).

With this approach, a specific member of staff is allocated to each student and provides both pastoral support and academic guidance. When pastoral models are adopted, it is usual for all learners to be allocated a single specific personal tutor. Pastoral tutoring is often unstructured and reactive to situations and learners approach tutors for assistance as and when needed. This has been noted to carry some weaknesses.

As Best (2002) pointed out, some students 'fall through the net' due to a lack of confidence to approach the tutor or the tutor being unavailable at times when needed. This latter issue is seen as especially problematic for marginalised learners such as disaffected learners, those with learning difficulties, ESOL learners, and young female learners. The model also relies on parity in quality of provision and not all tutors are as suited to this role as might be desired. As we shall see later this model was broadly adapted and adopted by Inspire.

### **The 'action planning model'**

This is a model which is most commonly found in vocational education in FE and is predominantly aimed at full-time learners. The role of the tutor is that of a learning manager whose responsibility is to record and to monitor individual progress and achievement. The approach to tutorials is defined, planned, structured and evaluated across the institution and thus the tutor 'works as part of a professional team to produce data which can be codified and fed into wider information systems such as the college Standardised Assessment Report (SAR)' (Chandler 2001: 27). This was the model broadly utilised in Leon College.

### **The 'learning development model'**

This is a model based on the idea of a learning partnership as tutor and tutee work together as collaborators to develop learning aims and outcomes. The tutor's role is to guide and support the tutee in order for them to become an autonomous, self-directed, self-motivated independent learner. The tutorial process is characterised by an individual negotiation of programmes with the learners and a clear co-ordination between the activities of learning and those of guidance and support. Central to this process is emotional labouring on the part of the tutor in order to build and maintain a collaborative relationship:

Whether working with individuals on a one to one basis or working with groups in a more structured setting, building relationships between themselves and students is considered the crucial vehicle for initiating change in learners' behaviours (Salisbury 2006: 39).

The ethos of this model was utilised by Inspire in its approaches to dealing with disaffected teenagers.

### **The 'academic learning manager model'**

In the past decade there has emerged a new model of tutoring which combines some of the approaches of the traditional models in order to develop a model of tutoring which fits into the more instrumental philosophy of post-new-managerialist FE. This model which can be found in many FE institutions and increasingly in private sector providers for full-time learners can be termed the 'professional model' or the 'academic learning manager model'.

This model can be seen as a fusion of the action planning and the learning development model. The tutor is normally employed full-time to support learners across the curriculum. These professionals have no teaching responsibilities and their role is solely to support the academic development of the learners within their 'caseload'. They are positioned to be independent of day-to-day classroom teaching and hence it is argued they can take a more objective and independent approach to tutorial supervision than classroom teachers who have a more complicated set of relationships with their learners. This is also intended to free classroom teachers from routine tutorial duties and to allow them to concentrate on teaching and

learning. Academic learning managers combine the roles of educational counsellor and academic target-setter and their remit is to review and report progress in a standardised and structured framework. According to Best (2000):

An advantage of this is that professional, structured support is always available when required but a noted shortcoming is that it is unlikely that the student will receive assistance from the same member of staff each time thus limiting the development of staff/student relations and anchoring of the student within the institution (2000: 22).

This approach has also been criticised for its dispassionate, objectifying approach to learner support (Hart 1996). According to one teacher at an East London FE college which had implemented this tutorial system in 2004:

*'I personally don't think it works for most learners. They (academic learning managers) still rely upon us for information about how the kids operate in classes. If they don't talk to us, it becomes like a production-line. Each kid gets an allotted amount of time each month and all the problems have to be sorted until the next meeting. In the meantime, they keep still coming to us for help' (Mark).*

A version of the academic learning manager was in place at Learntrade.

### **Key roles and responsibilities of a tutor**

According to Neville (2007) the principal roles and responsibilities of a tutor in FE, subject to variation in context and programme, could be listed as follows: directed learning; planning and overseeing the completion of planning; academic supervision vocational guidance; pastoral care reactive; pro-active pastoral casework and informal tutoring. In the following section of the chapter I intend to focus upon the first four of the key roles of a tutor in Leon College and Learntrade. Then I will discuss the effectiveness of the peer mentoring model adopted by Inspire.

### **6.3. Student support at Leon College**

Leon College's tutorial support system was uniform throughout the institution. As I suggested previously it was based upon the action planning model and applied to all learners of different ages, across all courses both in FE and HE. Leon College overhauled its tutorial system in 2004 in a bid to improve its Level Three achievements.

It introduced the following measures over three years: the A Level Information Service (ALIS) which was used to support a uniform target-setting process for all learners studying A Levels. Stronger partnerships with parents/guardians/carers were to be encouraged based on termly case-conference weeks where they were invited to review the progress of their charges with class teachers and curriculum managers alongside a more rigorous process of monitoring attendance and absences through the use of electronic registration. Electronic Individual Learning Plans (E-ILPs) were introduced in order to reinforce closer tracking of learners across the curriculum teams and to try to stop learners in difficulties from 'slipping through the net'. A Tutorial Support Co-ordinator (TSC) was appointed whose role it was to monitor lateness and attendance across the college and to follow this up by liaising with staff, learners and parents. Uniformly designed tutorial programmes were distributed including a whole-college induction package which was sent electronically to all class tutors in order to ensure standardised group tutorials and standardised training packages for all class tutors.

The implementation of these measures was not without its problems. Some staff tutors claimed they were de-professionalising, regimenting and too achievement-driven. Initially, they were suspicious of the role of the TSC whom they believed to be eroding their role as personal tutors. Some staff felt the new procedures were de-skilling and curtailing their autonomy to determine tutorial content. The fear that was being expressed by some was that the college was moving too quickly away from student support tutorials to achievement-driven systems

Some staff were still sceptical of the effectiveness of the college tutorial system. One told me:

*'The whole system is based on standardisation. One size fits all learners. There's no room for individual initiatives or a far more personal approach to individual learning. Everything has to follow the same patterns. It has to be documented, reported upon and tracked in exactly the same way. I think that overall some of the college's humanity was lost in order to supposedly improve its performance and achievement rates' (Samuel).*

### The effectiveness of tutorial provision on the Diploma in Leon College

Each learner on the Diploma course attended a group tutorial for one hour per week. They could also book individual tutorials with class teachers on an ad hoc basis but these were subject to the availability of staff. Their tutor was Chris who was also one of their main class teachers.

*Directed Learning* According to the majority of my respondents in group interview discussions, this was regarded highly:

*'It's really useful to have extra help with my coursework in tutorials. Chris reads over my work and points out exactly where I'm going wrong. I would be totally baffled if he didn't give me this kind of help'* (Biscuit man).

*'I feel nervous about asking questions in class because I don't want people to think I'm a mug or something so sometimes the lessons lose me. When we do it in tutorials I feel more confident because the group is smaller and he always sorts me out'* (Risky).

*Planning and over-seeing the completion of planning.* At Leon College as I have already indicated, the majority of tutorial planning was completed electronically and continually up-dated by all the staff that had contact with the learners. This process was seen as very clear and efficient by most of the learners in this cohort. The following comments are representative of the group as a whole:

*'I like to be able to see where I am going and to set my own targets. They are never forced on me. It's great to be able to see really clearly whether I'm getting there or not. My ILP is easy to read too and I don't get confused by looking at different report cards or anything like that'* (Pinky).

*'When I discuss targets I find it helpful because I like to know where I'm going and what I have to do to improve. I don't like being in the dark about my work and it all spurs me on to get better grades'* (Andy).

One of the themes which emerged during their group interview discussions was the group's general desire for structured support in learning. They all seemed to like to know what directions they were going in. This seemed to contrast with the way they believed they were treated at school where they said target-setting was negligible.

*Academic Supervision.* This was seen by most learners as very helpful, but time-limited. In fact, the learners in this group were more critical of this aspect of the

tutorial system at Leon College than any other. Many learners told me both individually and in group interviews that they wanted more time in individual tutorials to support their academic work:

*'I get so much done when I see Chris on a one-to-one basis. I learn far more than when I am with the rest of the group. He shows me exactly where I'm going wrong. I wish I could see him every week'* (Sam).

*'The group tutorials are ok for sorting out general problems with the work but I think I need more personal help. I would like to see him more regularly but I know that he's really busy'* (Imran).

*Vocational Guidance.* This was seen by the group as crucial to their future success on the programme and to their career prospects. As I have discussed earlier, the majority of the learners in the cohort were very satisfied with the subject specialist knowledge of their teachers and confident about their authenticity as 'trades' people'. Most of the learners were happy about the level of advice and guidance they were given on the programme and the help they were receiving to find work experience placements:

*'I think Chris is steering me in the right direction. He's got years of experience in the trade and I know he thinks I'll make a good carpenter so he's always encouraging me'* (Darren).

*'I know that he has found people jobs in the past and I believe he'll do the best for all of us if we keep working hard on the course and listen to his advice'* (Pinky).

### **6.3.1 Student support at Leartrade**

Leartrade adopted the academic learning manager (ALM) approach to tutoring as a result of seeing it in action in one of the manager's children's colleges. They believed it was the most appropriate because of the relative inexperience of their teaching staff and because it would allow their teachers to teach without being encumbered with learner support responsibilities.

They decided to employ a part-time tutor in order to cut costs but hoped that this would be compensated for by the fact that the ALM was a qualified and experienced FE teacher. The ALM developed his role as a learning coach who tracked achievement through one-to-one interviews and rigid goal-setting. The system was based on the identification of key criteria for success on the course. These included:

attendance and punctuality; performance in class; meeting assignment deadlines achievement of grades; additional literacy support if required; attitudes to study; behaviour in class; levels of practical skills; effective time management and team work and motivation.

Each learner on the course had to attend a monthly individual tutorial. In the first meeting every learner received an initial graded target for each area drawn from comments from the teachers and input from the learners themselves. Each subsequent meeting involved a review of their targets where learners were given the opportunity to assess their progress against each criterion. In essence, the tutorials became a space for learners to confront their own roles in learning and progress, making them aware of the consequences of their own actions.

The ALM was also called in on an ad hoc basis when there were problems with lateness, attendance or classroom behaviour.

This tutorial arrangement seemed to suit the teaching staff at Learntrade who were relieved to have no tutorial responsibilities. One staff member told me:

*'This was really my first teaching post and I must admit I was clueless about what a tutor does. I'm really glad that I have only to concentrate on preparing for lessons. We work really closely with Matt and he takes on all the tracking side really well'* (Andy).

#### The effectiveness of tutorial provision on the Diploma at Learntrade:

*Directed Learning.* None of this took place during tutorials because the ALM was not a subject specialist in Construction (he was a Geography teacher). He was unable to use his tutorial sessions to support learners in their principal learning areas, apart from helping them with their Functional Skills work and help them develop study skills. The help he could provide was warmly welcomed by most of the learners in the cohort, although they did regret that he lacked the expertise in Construction:

*'Matt is really supportive with my assignments. He reads through stuff and helps me with grammar and spelling. I wish he knew more about Construction because there are times when I don't get it in class'* (Mark).

*'It would have been better if one of our teachers did the tutorials because they could use the time to explain things to us one-to-one. There's never enough time in class to ask questions'* (Chas).

*Planning and overseeing the completion of planning.* This action planning function was central to the ethos of the ALM mode. According to Learntrade, its key advantage was that it could provide more 'objectivity' in planning as the ALM was not part of the day-to-day teaching team and hence could build independent relationships with the learners not subject to influence from their classroom behaviour. Overall, learners from this cohort seemed to be divided over Matt's distance from their teaching team.

On a personal level, the learners believed they had established 'reasonable' working relationships. Two thirds of the group were sceptical, however, believing that it could be detrimental to their progress on the course because Matt was still 'a bit of an outsider' and 'didn't know them well enough to make a proper comment.' Others said that it could be advantageous to them because he could be 'fairer' and more 'balanced' in his judgments about them.

The three comments below serve as a representation of the range of opinions in the group:

*'Matt is good at what he does and is always helpful with his advice. But sometimes I get the feeling that he doesn't know enough about what I'm capable of from the other teachers'* (Ants).

*'Matt is really strict with me about my targets which I think is really good for me. I need someone to be tough with me. I know the other teachers too well for it to make a difference'* (Tiny).

*'All he can do is ask me about what other people have written. He doesn't know how true it is or not. He has never seen me in class so he just goes along with the other teachers' comments. Sometimes this is unfair'* (Samuel).

*Academic Supervision.* The support of academic skills was understood by Learntrade to be of vital importance on this programme as many of the learners had struggled with academic work at school. The ALM's contribution to developing their study skills was recognised by most learners in the cohort who felt they were making



good progress in this area. This was particularly the case with Functional Skills which I have suggested earlier was problematic for this cohort:

*'Matt is really good at helping with coursework. He has the time to help me one to one with my coursework. The other teachers don't really have the time after class'* (Samuel).

It was clear from many of their responses both in individual interviews and in group interviews that learners saw Matt's role as a support to their main class teachers and filling in the gaps of their programme:

*'Matt has helped me build my confidence in written work. That's the area I knew I would struggle within the Diploma. He has helped me with lots of assignments and helped me get grades so that I have even surprised myself'* (Bonehead).

*Vocational Guidance.* The ALM had no specialist knowledge in this area and this responsibility was taken up by the group's class teachers. His role was to co-ordinate any advice, record it and feedback to learners via area targets.

The ALM attempted to compensate for his lack of knowledge of vocational options by continued discussion with class teachers and by contacting local employers. In effect, he was able to work as an 'unofficial careers advisor', providing support in job search and discussing options in tutorials which was acknowledged by the learners themselves:

*'Matt tries to help us sort out our placements and he has some good ideas about where I should be looking for work even though he is not from the industry itself'* (William).

### **6.3.2 Student support at Inspire**

Inspire's approach to student support based on a personal/pastoral model reflected their central philosophies of teaching and learning. Inspire's learner-centred teaching and supporting approaches were developed over six years ago and they believed these were essential in order to motivate young disengaged learners. Their teaching methods were located upon a base of individualised support and directed through a system of peer tutoring. All of Inspire's peer tutors were trained internally and had limited teaching qualifications. According to Topping (1997) the definitions

of peer tutoring have changed over many decades and could now include the following ten different dimensions:

*Curriculum content.* This included both knowledge and skills development across a wide range of subjects in both HE and FE. In the past Inspire used it to teach English, Maths, Health and Social Care and Personal Development courses.

*Contact constellation.* The numbers of peer tutors to peer tutees can vary as can the number of tutees to tutors. Inspire's peer tutors had a caseload of six tutees whom they saw on an individual basis. According to the organisation this ensures that learners have adequate time with their mentees.

*Year of study.* According to Topping (1997) tutors and tutees have tended to be either from the same year or from different years of study in the same institution. Inspire's peer mentors were on average three years older than their mentees and worked for the organisation rather than attending the same school. By chance, two of the respondents did attend the same school as one of their peer mentors had attended.

*Ability.* Same ability tutoring in FE was now very common (Colvin and Ashman 2010). In Inspire, the focus was on cross-ability tutoring where the peer tutor is able to support the tutee because of his superior mastery of skills.

*Role continuity.* The roles of the tutor/tutee may not be permanent and the strategic switching of roles may be beneficial (Colvin and Ashman 2010). In Inspire, the roles were permanent because they were employees of the centre, but in order to prevent issues of learner dependency, tutees were given new peer tutors each term. This was not without its problems as several of the learners suggested to me. The following comment can be seen as representative of some of their concerns:

*'The worst thing I don't like about their tutor system is the switching of tutors each term. Just when you really get used to a person, you have to work with someone else. I really liked working with Chantelle, and then they moved me. I really like Kerry but we don't see eye to eye in the same way'* (Mile End).

*Place.* Peer tutoring may vary in location of operation from classroom to Open Learning Centre (OLC) to tutee's home. At Inspire, peer tutoring normally took place in their main building but could also be done in learners' homes and social workers offices. This flexibility of approach could be very effective when dealing with learners who are disengaged or Looked After Children (LAC). I will discuss this in more detail in the next section.

*Time.* Tutorials can be scheduled in class time or outside it depending upon whether they are substitutional (used to replace standard teaching) or supplementary (as an addition to normal teaching) (Topping 1997).

As discussed earlier, Inspire peer tutors operated as learning support in class and as tutors outside scheduled class time. According to the organisation this helped develop a continuity of contact.

*Tutee characteristics.* Peer tutoring can be used for all learners or for specific sub groups, for example, the especially able, those with language difficulties or those who are struggling with their studies (Colvin and Ashman 2010). Inspire tended to use this system to support those who were disengaged and of varying ability.

*Tutor characteristics.* Traditionally, peer tutors tend to be the most advanced learners drawn from a particular cohort. In the case of Inspire, the peer tutors were drawn from the ranks of former tutees who had proved to be most adept at supporting and teaching and who had also been trained and semi-qualified to work with disengaged young people.

*Objectives of peer tutoring.* These can vary according to the context (Colvin and Ashman 2010). Peer tutors at Inspire worked across the full range of tutorial objectives, including intellectual and academic achievement, affective and attitudinal development and self-image and self-concept gains.

### The effectiveness of peer tutoring at Inspire

The advantages of peer tutoring are often explored through the paradigms of social constructivism and approaches to learning through social and cognitive peer

scaffolding (Topping 1997). These include more active, inter-active and participatory learning; the empowering of learners in a democratic way reducing learner disaffection; reducing social isolation and developing self-esteem and self-image through modelling and the provision of a positive role model through the peer tutor (Greenwood et al. 1990).

I now intend to look at each of those suggested advantages in turn from the point of view of the learners in my cohort:

*Active, inter-active and participatory learning.* According to Inspire, this philosophy was embedded throughout all their teaching strategies. On the Diploma course this approach to learning ran throughout the personalised support in mainstream classroom sessions to individual tutorial meetings. The peer teaching/tutoring enhanced active learning, a fact recognised by the learners themselves:

*'The peer tutors make us work harder than we've ever done before because they are always on our backs and you can't hide from them like you can sometimes in class' (Jake) (from his reflective journal).*

*'It's not like they boss us around. They say they learn from us as much as we learn from them. We all get involved in the lessons and it's much more interesting than the way I got taught at school' (Ghost).*

*Empowering of learners in a democratic way reducing learner disaffection.* Key to this was a clarity and consensus about the roles and responsibilities of the tutor and the tutee (Greenwood et al. 1990). In group interviews and individual interviews many of the following themes emerged around their growing feelings of empowerment through the course:

- Learners said they felt more *'in control of their learning'*
- Some called it *'like a partnership'*
- Others enjoyed *'the space to work on your own'* but also to know *'help was always on hand if we mess up'*
- One said they *'were being treated like intelligent people and not half wits'*

A comment from Patrick can serve as an adequate crystallisation of the group's feelings about their development as independent learners:

*'I suppose for the first time in my school career I feel that it's my course and that it's up to me to get what I can out of it. If I get lazy then I get nothing from the Diploma. If I work hard then I get the reward of the qualification. It's like Inspire has put my hands on the steering wheel of a car and told me to drive wherever I want to go and at whatever speed I want.'*

*Reducing social isolation and the development of self-esteem and self-image through modelling.* The modelling role of the peer tutor was essential to the development of self-efficacy amongst the learners in this cohort. According to the interviewees this was mainly achieved through providing them with credible role models via the peer tutor system. To them the peer tutors fulfilled, for example, the roles of 'leader', 'example', 'inspiration', 'motivator', 'coach'. They reported the following cognitive and affective impacts upon them:

*'improved my time management'(Ghost).*

*'made me more organised about doing homework' (Mile End).*

*'made me feel more confident about completing the course' (Ben).*

*'made me think about how I talked back to teachers in class so I didn't argue so much' (Jake).*

*'made me glad that Inspire had given me a second chance after I messed up the first one' (Show-off).*

*'made me realise that there's nothing wrong in asking for help if you don't know something' (Alfie).*

*'made me feel like I belong somewhere and that not all teachers are out to get me' (Patrick).*

*Provision of a positive role model.* Learners felt that peer tutors were better than staff tutors at understanding their problems and were better able to empathise with their difficulties and their life concerns and personal issues and the promotion of better achievement and progression (Greenwood et al.1990: 200). What also helped to enhance the status of the peer tutors as role models was that they, too, had struggled in mainstream education and had managed to succeed. The following

comment is representative of the way that many of the learners felt about their peer tutors:

*'Jade's like living proof that you don't have to live in the past. She told everyone she did badly at school by messing around and bunking off and that none of the teachers thought she'd make anything of herself. Now she's a teacher and she can laugh at everyone. If I work hard at this course and listen to her, I think I can succeed the same way she did and make a go of this course and get a good job later'* (Ben).

Nearly all the learners in this cohort agreed that their peer tutors more than their class teachers could appreciate the difficulties they faced in both their academic and their social lives. From group and individual interviews the following descriptions of the peer tutor/tutee relationships came out:

*'unofficial counsellor' (Show-off)*

*'better than my social worker because she's my personal one'*(Alfie)

*'a shoulder to cry on when you need it' (Jake)*

*'one of us, but not one of us, if you now what I mean?'*(Patrick)

*a trusted friend' (Ben)*

*'a work-mate' (Ghost)*

*'big-sister' (Mile End)*

*'a port in a storm' (Markie)*

*'someone who knows me more than I know myself' (Femi)*

*'a kick up the arse when I need it' (Louise)*

*'someone who knows the real meaning of the word confidential'.* (Patrick)

Inspire's learners were the most enthusiastic of the cohorts about the support they received. The main factors which cemented and reinforced these ties according to the respondents were: age-proximity; similar educational backgrounds; consistency of contact; enthusiasm of the peer tutors; professionalism of peer tutors; ease of access and objectivity of judgments.

#### **6.4 Student support and attendance**

Poor attendance is an issue affecting most FE institutions and is one which has been highlighted in many studies (LSC 2002; OfSTED 2013 and 2004b; York Consulting 2006). It has been linked with low educational achievement, lower status occupations, less stable future career patterns and less stable employment and can

have long-term psychological and physical effects such as depression, mental illness and drug dependency (Graham and Bowling 1995; Davies 1999). Those in the NEET category were three times more likely to have played truant consistently than the average school student (Steedman and Stoney 2004). Ninety per cent of the learners under study had less than 70 per cent attendance in their final years at school. According to York Consulting (2006) and FEDA (1995) key institutional measures to overcome the problem of truancy included:

- electronic registration systems and a rigorous approach to attendance monitoring with the communication of clear policies on attendance and a high priority given by senior management to attendance policy;
- regular analysis of data in order to isolate patterns of absence and whether individuals need support;
- the use of Tutorial Support Workers (which, they suggest, have a predominant role to play in improving attendance);
- the provision of alternative curricula supplemented by reward schemes;
- effective liaison with learners' parents and carers and with external agencies and institutions
- the implementation of a more effective recruitment and selection systems (ensuring the 'right bottom is on the right seat');

I now intend to examine each survey centre's approaches to absenteeism through their use of the tutorial system. The following three tutorials were observed by me and were followed up by a later interview with the learners concerned.

#### **6.4.1 A tutorial at Leon College**

##### The case study learner: Kiran

Kiran's attendance had become more erratic in the last few weeks of the first term. He had missed three sessions and overall his attendance had dipped to below 60 per cent for the term. As a consequence of this, he received a tutorial from one of his class teachers lasting 20 minutes.

Kiran was shown his attendance records as a hard copy print from the electronic register. He was then asked to explain his recent absences. Chris, his tutor, was polite and respectful in tone. Kiran couldn't provide a reason apart from 'a cold' for which he could not provide a Doctor's Certificate (which was the normal college procedure). Chris went on to discuss his missing assignment which was due the previous week. Kiran said he 'was having a few problems writing it'. Chris suggested an action plan to improve his attendance and his outstanding work. Kiran was asked to set an attendance target for next term. He said '100 per cent'. Chris then suggested a target for a draft of his assignment which he would review with Kiran and provide support if need be. Kiran agreed to submit what 'I think I can do' by the first week of the following term. The targets were added to his electronic ILP.

Kiran completed the assignment after receiving help in the next tutorial. His attendance averaged 90 per cent the following term but he completed all his assignments within the set deadlines.

According to him, Kiran's studentship (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000) had been non-linear and only partly unpredictable over this year. Initially he had been determined to use the course as a fresh start and did 'all the right things'. Failing his first practical assessment affected his confidence and he began to doubt his own abilities to complete the course. Consequently, he started to stay at home and miss lessons. This triggered a vicious circle of non-attendance and partial disengagement (Martinez 2001). The next summative assignment made him more anxious because of the classes he missed. The tutorial support he received from Leon College served to break the cycle for him:

*'I saw this as a new start and really did my best not to mess up in the same way that I did at school. I made sure I had a copy of my time-table, learned where all the rooms were and really listened to what the teachers were telling me about the course. When Chris failed me I was gutted. I thought I had done really well in the test so it hurt even more. I began to think am I really good enough to pass this if I can't even get the easy things right. I was confused by the next assignment and I didn't want to go in because I knew I had to hand it in. Chris was ok with me about it. I thought the tutorial was much better than I thought it would be. He didn't treat me like a kid at school. He was straight with me. I was straight with him. I kept my end of the bargain. He kept his. I was happy to come back next term.'*



### 6.4.2 A tutorial at Learntrade

#### The case study learner: Matthew

Matthew's attendance had been erratic for the past month. He appeared to be 'picking and choosing' which sessions to attend. He had missed most of his Functional Skills and classroom theory sessions but had 90 per cent attendance for his practical workshop sessions. He had already cancelled two tutorial sessions with his ALM because of 'family problems'. The session lasted 20 minutes.

Matt showed Matthew his attendance reports from the two class teachers and asked him to comment on the differences between his attendance in practical sessions and his attendance in Functional Skills and Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) sessions. Matthew replied that 'he didn't like writing'. Matt said those two areas were an important part of the course which he had known about all along and that he could not decide which classes he wanted to attend.

Matt then produced the learner's profile of graded targets. He highlighted those where Matthew was on or above target which were practical skills levels, time management and team work. He contrasted these with those areas in which Matthew had fallen below initial targets in the past month. Matthew was asked to comment on the differences between the two. He fell silent again.

Matt then went through each criterion for success which was under target and, referring to notes from the class teachers, suggested new targets and deadlines to be achieved. Matt was objective and business-like in tone. Matthew agreed to them without comment.

He was finally reminded that if his attendance fell below 80 per cent overall next term (it now stood at 51%), he could be withdrawn from the programme.

Matthew's attendance continued to drop in the first month of the following term. He refused to attend tutorial sessions and left the programme.

Matthew's story was one of struggle. Initially he found support through a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) and a peer. Although he was confident in the practical sessions, he found the written assessments difficult, however, and started to absent himself from those classes. During this period of the course he admitted to 'giving up'. By the time he attend his attendance tutorial, he wanted to give the course another chance but left believing that the centre was not interested in supporting him:

*'I found new mates quite quickly. The ice breaking games helped and we used to go around together during breaks. Brian was quite clever so I used to ask him to help me out with my work all the time, especially Maths because I was really crap at that. I suppose if I had really wanted it, I could have re-taken the assessments and worked hard in class. But it all got too much for me in the end. I don't know if I was really listening to anyone at the time apart from myself. I know I was a real pain in the arse to the teachers. I just lost any motivation I had for the course and couldn't see a way forwards. In the tutorial I don't think I had a chance to properly explain myself. I was wound up and I couldn't get my words straight. There was no way I was going to agree to some of the targets set, they were much too high for me. But I don't think he wanted to know. He was just acting under orders from the teachers. I really wanted to stay on the course, but no one was interested. This was all a done deal to get me off.'* (from his reflective journal).

### **6.4.3 A tutorial at Inspire**

#### The case study learner: Alfie

Alfie's attendance had been 100 per cent until after the half-term break when he was absent for two weeks in succession. His peer tutor, Charmaine, had phoned him several times on his mobile phone over the period and left voice messages but had received no response from him. Charmaine decided to speak to his foster carer and arrange a three-way tutorial meeting with Alfie at this home, the session lasted an hour.

Charmaine's approach to support for Alfie was underpinned by fostering a notion of 'connectedness'. Connectedness is developing a 'sense of positive attachment to an institution' (Goodenow 1993: 28). Goodenow (1993) suggested there are seven qualities which contribute to these feelings of belonging: liking the institution; perceiving the teachers are supportive and caring; having strong social ties within the institution; being engaged in their own current and future progress; believing that

the disciplinary system is fair and consistent and that a learner is 'not being picked upon' by staff.

He argued that this can be increased by a series of support strategies. These include: creating trusting relationships between learners, teachers and parents; fostering high expectations/motivations in learners through self-empowerment; applying fair and consistent disciplinary policies which are agreed collectively and applied with understanding (1993: 30).

Charmaine initially asked Alfie about his opinions of Inspire and the Diploma programme. His responses were positive. She continued by asking him questions about his peer groups, his class teachers and his peer tutors. Again, his comments were positive. She then went on to ask him about the way he perceived his progress on the course and his future intentions. She read out comments from his teachers and took him through his current grades which were more than satisfactory. Alfie said he was very happy on the course and wanted to complete it and hopefully to progress onto the next level of the Diploma.

Charmaine asked Alfie about his recent absences and he had no answer to them. She then showed him the areas of work he had missed. From her laptop computer she printed off notes relating to the sessions he had missed and talked him through them. Alfie was asked to set his own deadlines for the two short formative assessments which he had failed to complete whilst he was away from the centre. Alfie's deadlines were documented by Charmaine and noted by his carer who said she would support him as much as she could to reach them.

Alfie completed the assessments within his chosen deadline (two weeks) and submitted them to Charmaine. His attendance improved over the next term.

Alfie's comments:

*'I was really worried when Marie (his carer) told me she was coming to the house. I thought I was in really big trouble. I thought I had missed too much work and that they were going to throw me off the course.'*

*Charmaine reminded me how much I liked the course and how much I could lose if I didn't get back on track. She wasn't heavy at all on me. She showed me what I needed to do to catch up. I really didn't want to leave and she believed me.'*

According to a Principal of an FE college awarded a grade of 'Outstanding' by OfSTED in a recent inspection:

*'The mark of a successful college is high levels of learner achievement and good progression...This is really the end result of a lot of hard work in a series of areas, the right students on the right courses, professional staff, effective teaching methods, efficient student support services.'*

### **6.5. Learners at risk- support for those who struggled**

According to Martinez (2001) there are two key mechanisms that are needed to be put in place in order to support those learners who are deemed 'at risk' of failure in colleges. These are: the monitoring of poor attendance and the early identification and intervention in cases where learners are seen to be underperforming. All three centres under study claimed to me that these were central to their tutorial support systems. I would like to examine these in turn in the next section.

#### **6.5.1. Leon College**

A prime college target at Leon College was the reduction of withdrawals in 2011. Learners were identified 'at risk of non-completion' via their 'early warning system' of weekly class tutorials. Once a learner was identified by their class tutor, they were given a package of three one-hour individual tutorials attended by their class tutor, Curriculum Manager and Head of Department in which detailed action learning plans were discussed and agreed upon. Those learners with particular barriers to learning, such as social or specific learning disabilities, were referred to specialist sections within the college, such as the college counsellor or the learner support unit. The college had experienced cuts in these services during 2009 and by their own admission, the specialist student services had struggled at times to meet the expanding demand.

According to the college these methods had reduced the number of withdrawals in Level Two and under courses from 28 per cent to 18 per cent in three years. In the Construction curriculum area this had remained constant at 22 per cent across all levels of qualification since 2006.

Both Pinky and Risky were given an individual set of learning targets and deadlines. These centred on attendance, which had fallen below 70 per cent (the trigger point for the at risk system), their failed assessments and their struggles with course work. Both of the learners were given three tutorials between February and April 2011. Although they attended the meetings, they continued to miss their attendance targets and were withdrawn from the course in mid-April 2011.

In their interviews with me Pinky and Risky both expressed satisfaction with the support they were given whilst they were struggling with the programme. They tended to place the blame for their problems on their own deficiencies as learners. Their lack of self-belief in their ability to achieve in education, which was the legacy of their previous schooling, impacted upon their motivation and created a situation of 'can't' rather than 'won't' (James 2002):

*'None of this was the college's fault. I don't blame them in the slightest for getting rid of me early on in the course. They want people to do well and not someone messing up their figures like me. It all went pear-shaped because of me, really. The tutorials were really useful because they gave me proper targets to aim for. All the teachers tried to help me and they wanted me to stay on but I don't think I was up to it then' (Pinky).*

*'I was really hoping in the beginning that this would be a fresh start for me. New course and new start. I wanted to show my parents that they were wrong in chucking me out because I was getting into trouble and going nowhere. But the same shit affects the way I see things and it's been really difficult for me to study when there is so much going on in my head. Maybe if I was living at home and they could've encouraged me it might have been a different story? They all tried to help me any way they could. I used to come away from the meetings thinking 'yeah I want to stay on this'. But I would wake up the next morning with the voice in my head saying 'who you kidding?' Of course I know I let everyone down who worked so hard for me. I just wasn't good enough this time...again' (Risky).*

According to Steve (one of their key teachers) the decision to withdraw them was subject to much debate:

*'There were a lot of heated discussions about what to do with them. I was not happy with what happened to them. They were two young men from problematic backgrounds and poor educational histories. I think the support system here isn't really set up for learners like these. I'm sure there is more we could have done to support them in their studies. To that extent, I think we failed them.'*

### **6.5.2. Learntrade**

At Learntrade all teachers were required to write weekly progress reports on all learners. These were sent to the Centre Directors who discussed them with staff on a monthly basis. All struggling learners were highlighted in these meetings and action plans agreed with staff members. Learners who were seen to be weakest were then required to attend meetings with teachers and Centre Directors.

Four learners on the C&BE course, Carlton, Bonehead, Tiny and Ants, were identified as struggling. They all had poor attendance in February and March, on average below 30 per cent, and had all failed initial formative assessments.

There were also behavioural issues concerning Carlton, who allegedly had sworn at a teacher, and Bonehead, who had walked out of a class after an argument with another learner. The learners were asked to attend initial meetings with Centre Directors and teachers in March and April but only Tiny and Ants turned up for their meetings. Carlton and Bonehead ignored the requests and according to them, were never asked again. All four continued to attend intermittently but their attendances never reached their targets of 70 per cent. In May 2011, the decision was made by the Centre Directors at a monthly meeting to withdraw all four of the learners. All four of the learners expressed different opinions about the process of withdrawal from the programme.

#### Ants

Ants was the most self-critical and apologetic of the group. He believed that he was solely responsible for what had happened to him and questioned whether the course was too difficult for him in the first place considering his lack of achievement at school. He was asked to leave school before taking his examinations in the Summer Term because of his poor attendance. Ants had been 'statemented' at school because of his mild case of Asperger's Syndrome (A.S.) but had received no support for it at Learntrade despite frequent requests from his family. This is common in many smaller private training providers (OfSTED 2011). Overall, he felt that he had been given every chance to succeed but had failed because of his own 'attitude' to learning:

*'I was scared stiff about screwing up my last chance. I knew this would be different from school, which is what I wanted, but I know what I'm like. I wanted to be the perfect student this time 'round'. I really wanted to prove to my parents I could do something right in education and have a future. I know that I really screwed up now. It would be easy to blame my AS but it was my entire fault. I take total responsibility for this. I started bunking off for no reason and the work got harder and I couldn't keep up with it. J.C (the Centre Director) gave me a second chance in the meetings but I was too stupid to take it. Maybe I'm just not cut out for education?'*

### Tiny

Tiny had been uncertain about the programme since enrolment. It had been recommended to him by his form teacher at school because he had been withdrawn from his GCSEs because of his poor attendance. According to TLRP (2006) as in the case of many young working class males, it was assumed that the only alternative to an academic path for him was a vocational one. By his own admission, he had never considered a career in Construction and was very wary of the Diploma as a consequence. When he was withdrawn from the course he was completely in agreement with the decision and was intending to leave himself. In retrospect, he felt that he was on the wrong course from the beginning and that the tutorial process simply delayed the inevitable:

*'I came from Forest Gate and the rest of the class were from Hornchurch or Romford. They knew people from the same schools and knew the same places. I was a foreigner to them so we never got on. I was too different to them. They were pure Essex boys. I'm just not practical. I've always been academic. When the class teaching is writing then I'm fine but when we have to do things with tools and things like that then I'm rubbish' I thought it was all really a waste of time. I never wanted to work on a building site and this was a course for people that did. I was like a fish out of water. I should never have enrolled. I really wanted to go back and do my GCSEs again. I tried to get something out of it but my heart wasn't really in it.'*

### Bonehead

Bonehead was the most frustrated with the decision to withdraw him from the course. He felt that the process was a 'set up' and that the decision had already been made. Bonehead had been involved in a series of conflicts with teachers from the first week and by his own admission, had never truly 'settled down'. In spite of failing his construction assessment, he had made some progress academically

having passed his Functional Skills assessment in Information Technology. Bonehead's approach to his teachers became more aggressive as the term progressed; however this was partly as a result of undisclosed 'home problems', which he maintained contributed to his frequent absences. He felt that these were never acknowledged at Learntrade nor was he given enough encouragement when he passed his assessments:

*'I thought I was doing ok there. I think all they were doing was gathering evidence against me like the police do and waiting for me to make a mistake so they could get rid of me. There was no point in me turning up for the meetings because I don't think they were going to listen to what I said or what I thought about anything. Sure, I was no angel and I had a few run-ins with teachers but who didn't? I wasn't the worst behaved in the class. I had problems which I didn't want to tell them about because it was my business but I think I was getting better at college work after I passed some of the tests but no one gave me a pat on the back. I don't think I got a fair trial from the place at all.'*

### Carlton

Carlton had originally been 'encouraged' to enrol on the course by his mother (otherwise he would have been 'packed off to Lagos to live with my dad who I can't stand'). According to his teachers he was the most alienated of the group from the centre and that his 'shirty' attitude to the course was apparent from the start. He was very disinclined to become involved in ice-breaking activities and in the 'life' of the class as a whole during the first few weeks of term. I observed that he tended to sit away from the rest of the learners, operating as an outsider and was very reluctant to involve himself in group work, preferring to work alone. Under pressure to do so by the teacher he would only make a token effort in groups or he would try to disrupt the activity by playing with his phone or doing nothing to contribute. When he completed work, however, it was of a high standard.

In two individual interviews with me, he appeared to be highly confident of his own abilities but indifferent to the course and uncaring about his future prospects. Although his attendance was over 70 per cent Carlton failed to turn up for his assessments and also failed to turn up twice at meetings with the Centre Directors and, when he did, he is said to have provided only single word answers. After he was sent his official letter of withdrawal from the course, he returned it to the centre



in pieces. Carlton's behaviour during the three months he was on the programme and his complete attitudinal disengagement from it, suggest that he had been a casualty of inadequate Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) (an issue which I have discussed in Chapter Four) and the inability of the centre to suggest more appropriate study options for him. His own comments partly reinforce this interpretation:

*'I have no hard feelings about what they did to me. This is what they had to do. I suppose they were forced to because it was the only alternative. I could have finished the course. The work wasn't difficult at all. I would have passed the assessments. I just wasn't interested in the course in the slightest. I never said to anyone that I wanted to work in Construction... When I went to the meeting they tried to persuade me to carry on because they knew I could do this, but there was no point in arguing with them so I just kept my mouth shut. I had no problems with the course or the teachers but I knew from the off that it wasn't right for me. I think that maybe if they had given me some others ideas I might still be there now. But I don't think they were listening to me properly.'*

### **6.5.3. Inspire**

Learning mentors at Inspire were required to write weekly reports based on individual ILPs and these were compiled by the teaching team and discussed regularly. Each learner's progress was then reviewed with them individually on a monthly basis in a meeting with their parents or carers. They argued that this gave them the opportunity to isolate problems and to discuss them with all parties concerned before they reached crisis point. If their learners are at serious risk of disengagement they are scheduled weekly meetings with tutors, mentors, parents and carers until the issues have been seen to be resolved.

The two learners who were eventually withdrawn from the course, Jake and Show-off, had six weeks of additional support before the decision was made between May and June 2011. Both had poor records of academic achievement and attendance and their problem were compounded by the fact they were both Looked After Children (LAC).

According to the Department of Education only 15% of LAC achieved five GCSEs A to C grade nationally compared with 70 per cent for all children. In addition, one

third of LAC form part of those young people deemed as in the long-term NEET category at aged 19 (2013b).

Of the 65,000 Looked After Children, 42,000 have some sort of special educational needs (2013b). Lobley and Beckworth (2008) identified five key reasons why LAC under-achieve in education. These include:

- The instability of their placements
- The amount of time they spend out of school or other learning settings
- The lack of support they receive in their education if they do get behind with their work
- Inadequate support and encouragement in their studies at home
- Fundamental problems with physical, emotional and mental health issues (2008: 36)

Inspire had a good track record of working with LAC and had been successful with social service and Leaving Care referrals for the past three years developing short bespoke individualised programmes for the young people. Jake and Show-off were the first LAC to be supported through a year-long accredited qualification.

### Jake

Jake had attended various different schools in London and Essex but had never spent longer than 18 months in any school. In the past five years he had been in four foster placements and had lived with his current foster carers for 18 months. Jake was referred directly to Inspire by the council's LAC services. Jake was initially sceptical about the course but was encouraged by his carer to enrol. Jake had difficulties with reading and writing, but had refused to be tested for a learning disability at school and hence had no statement of special needs. Inspire were aware of this and his previous fragmented educational background and therefore, his academic programme was built around providing him with more intensive individual literacy support.

When his attendance became an issue after Easter 2011, Inspire organised a series of six meetings with Jake at home (he had stopped attending by then) with his carer. Inspire's approaches to supporting both Jake and Show-off were similar to those recommended by Lobley and Beckworth (2008) as effective ways of working with LACs. These included:

- Building a long-term partnership between education centre, learner and carer
- Providing peer support in class
- Developing role-model and/or mentor networks (2008:22).

At the initial meetings Jake was keen to agree to attendance and lateness targets but these were never subsequently adhered to.

This impacted upon his relationship with his carer which had hitherto been harmonious. According to both of them, their relationship began to deteriorate as arguments developed over his attitude towards Inspire and the course and a 'power struggle' (his words) took place in the house. Jake became increasingly indifferent to everything and everyone around him which became evident in his final meetings with Inspire in June where he refused to speak or agree to anything. In the final meeting he walked out of his home after five minutes. A month after he was withdrawn from the programme, his care placement ended and he was given temporary accommodation in a hostel by the care services.

I interviewed Jake several months after he left Inspire in October 2011. He was apologetic and regretted what had happened, placing the blame on his immaturity:

*'I got my first official warning in February. I was getting hot and bored in one of my PLTS assessments so I asked if I could go to the toilet. I went out for a fag and when I got back Olivia said she could smell the smoke on me and asked me to stay behind after class to explain myself because there was no smoking at the centre. At the end of the class I ran past her and the next day she had a meeting with me and my foster-carer and gave me a written warning. My foster-carer also grounded me for a week. It got to the point where I couldn't see a reason for going in the morning. I mean, honestly, that I just couldn't be bothered to turn up for most classes and when I did I had missed so much that I couldn't follow what was going on so I just*

*used to mess around because there was no point in trying to learn. I can't fault anyone at Inspire. They worked really hard for me. For the first time I felt that I had teachers that were really on my side who believed in me. That it wasn't just the same old crap, you know? I was really beginning to see the point of education and qualifications. Then I don't know why I just lost it. So I started to bunk. They tried everything to get me back on track but I just lost my nerve. Maybe I wasn't mature enough to see it when I had something good. Everybody wanted me to stay towards the end but for me I had already made up my mind and they more they asked me, the more I felt I had to go. I just couldn't handle it. End of story. Nobody's fault but my own'.*

### Show-off

When Show-off's disaffection with the course began to evidence itself through minor classroom disruption in February 2011 Inspire decided that he was lacking sufficient academic challenge in class and hence his behaviour was rooted in boredom and frustration at the pace of learning. His initial diagnostic test results suggested that he was between Level Two and Level Three in Literacy. In a group interview with me he came across as very confident and articulate. During the initial meetings with him in March it was decided that he should become a trainee peer mentor in the class.

In a meeting with the Director of Studies at Inspire, his carer and a senior peer mentor, Show-off was given a developmental action plan. It consisted of a quasi job description and a set of targets which included:

- Responsibility towards mentoring two new less confident learners
- A classroom role in supporting the teacher in the distribution of resources, etc.
- An extra hour of mentoring training per week
- An opportunity to take Level Two in ICT as an additional qualification
- A commitment to reaching 95 per cent attendance
- A commitment to 100 per cent punctuality

The previous government's green paper *Youth Matters* (DFES 2005d) was very clear about what it believed to be the key benefits of peer mentors to other young people and to the mentors themselves:

They can act as role models, raising aspiration and achievements and exerting a powerful influence on young people. They can be particularly effective with those who have been disengaged from their communities or from learning (2005d:41).

All of Inspire's peer mentors had previously been disengaged young people and they were well aware of its potential benefits:

Peer tutoring is often promoted on the grounds that for the mentors, it is learning by teaching. This view is expanded in the old saying 'to teach is to learn twice (Hartman 1980: 27).

Sternberg's (1985) theory of intelligence performance identified components which could be enhanced during peer tutoring:

The meta-cognitive skills of planning, monitoring and evaluation all the cognitive processes of perceiving, differentiating, selecting, storing. Just preparing to be a peer tutor have been proved to enhance cognitive processes in the tutor by increasing attention and motivation for the task and necessitating a review of existing knowledge and skills (Topping 1997: 6).

Show-off was enthusiastic about his new role and the prestige it carried and his attitude to work changed. When I first observed him in his class in April, he appeared to be a quietly confident class leader who enjoyed the challenge of his new commitments and the respect of his peers. Both his attendance and his time-keeping improved and he became a valuable asset to the class teacher. His peer training included identifying life-goals and aspirations via a series of life-plan projects which lead to him producing a summary of his abilities and areas of development which were fed into his individual learning plan on a weekly basis. He seemed to enjoy the support and training he received and met his own targets successfully for two months.

The training also had an impact on his sense of self-efficacy. As he told me when I first interviewed him:

*'I feel like a different person. It's like all the training is bringing out the real me, the person who can do important things. Not the kid who first arrived at the centre, disrespectful and naughty I think I have a real future now. One where I can use my brains for once.'*

Show-off's enthusiasm for his role became increasingly less consistent, however, during the summer months and his attendance and punctuality began to lapse. He also became less co-operative in class and began to shirk his mentoring responsibilities arguing with his mentees. He then decided to drop out of his mentor training because he said he had 'changed his mind about it'.

Show-off's changes in behaviour appeared to have been triggered by his father's release from prison in the summer of 2011. He had always had a traumatic relationship with his father and seemed desperate to rebuild a more stable and stronger relationship with him. He began to see his father on a weekly basis at the weekends. Teachers at Inspire believe that these made him 'anxious' and 'less settled'. His friends on the course said he had become very 'moody' and 'withdrawn' most of the time.

When I interviewed him six months after leaving the programme he was living with another foster carer in Kent. He appeared to me up-beat, and reflective of his time on the course and full of hope for a return to education:

*'I could feel the pressure was on me, like everyone else at first. I was new so we were all a bit nervous about what to expect. I really wanted to make a big effort for my career. It was different for me because I knew everyone was watching. If other kids messed up I don't think their parents would've minded? I can't thank them enough for what they did for me at Inspire. It changed my mind set and probably my whole life. Even though I didn't finish the course, I think I learned a lot. When I first came there, I had no real direction no hope, nothing and I didn't think I had any skills. They showed me differently. I didn't get the qualification but I learned much more about what I could do for myself. They helped me to look at myself and find my own skills. I know that I will go back to college now because I believe it myself more. I left there because I had to but I will always be grateful for what they taught me.'*

## **7. Conclusion**

### The effectiveness of tutorial support in general

In spite of many of the issues raised earlier about the effectiveness of systems of tutorial support as a means of motivating and reengaging learners (Eccelstone 1999; Morris et al. 2007; Colley 2003 and Bowers 2006), overall, my findings tend to support the view that the more disengaged learners tend to respond more positively

to individualised tutorial support as a means of motivation and engagement (Best 2002; DCFS 2007b; Tennard et al. 2008; Bysse et al. 2008; Swift et al. 2009 and Gracey and Kelly 2010) .

The learners at Leon College spoke highly of the Action Planning model in operation there. According to them the strongest features of this model were: one hour group tutorials, the availability of ad hoc individual meetings with their tutors, class teachers who were also their tutors and the use of e-learning plans and vocational guidance given by those with specialised knowledge. They were least happy with the academic supervision provided on the course and said they would have preferred fewer group tutorials and more opportunities for individual support:

*'The group tutorials were ok, but sometimes we needed one-to- one help more than just five minutes after class and the teachers were too busy to give it'* (Kiran).

At Learntrade learners were very satisfied with the level of academic support given to them by the ALM but had mixed opinions about the level of support they received in their goal planning partly because he was not a member of the teaching team and partly because of the low level of vocational guidance they received because of his lack of industrial experience.

According to Cage:

*'He was a real help with my coursework but because he was never in the classroom and didn't know anything about Construction, he couldn't really explain things to me about the work, so I always had to find a teacher to fill in the gaps. It would have been better to have had just one person to rely on.'*

Responses from students at Inspire indicated that it was the most effective institution at providing tutorial support. Learners at this centre tended to describe themselves as self-directed and self-motivated. Inspire's usage of the peer mentoring model had been established for a long time in their centre and had been very effective on short courses. During 2011 this model was piloted on the Diploma. Learners at the centre were enthusiastic about the support provided by peer mentors. According to the respondents, the peer mentor combined the roles of pastoral and academic tutor to great effect. In interviews and group interview sessions they used words like 'solid',

'respect', 'trust' and 'bond' to represent the relationships they developed with staff at Inspire. Overall what they were responding to was the peer-led, individualised support provided on a consistent and structured basis by the Inspire team. According to Alfie:

*'She was my rock. Every time I struggled with something I could always turn to her and she would say to me 'You are doing fine' and show me how well I was doing. And I was doing fine'.*

#### Student support for those with poor attendance and at risk of withdrawal

In this chapter I assessed the tutorial systems in place in each institution for those who were deemed at risk of withdrawal from the course in the context of only a 12 per cent national completion rate for the Diploma in C&BE (Nelson and O'Donnell (2012)). I found that although each centre had the same objectives, to monitor poor attendance and to identify and intervene in cases of underperformance (Martinez 2001), each had different systems. Leon College used a package of supplementary tutorials attended by tutors and managers and detailed action planning to support struggling learners. This had proved effective across the entire college.

Although the two learners whose cases I examined in the chapter were satisfied with the support given, their lack of self-efficacy (which is a common problem with disengaged learners [Gracey and Kelly 2010]) led to their withdrawal.

Leartrade also used a tracking system to highlight learners who were struggling. Learners were identified from their weekly progress reports and action plans were drawn up by teachers and Centre Directors and then discussed with the learners. Leartrade's approach was the most 'centralist' of the three institutions as its targets were 'top down' and directed towards the learners. According to Gracey and Kelly (2010), this approach had distinct disadvantages for disaffected learners because it could serve to heighten their feelings of alienation from an institution and make them feel they are being 'punished' for their problems rather than supported.

More fundamental weaknesses in the system of support were illustrated by the experiences of the four learners who were withdrawn from the programme: Ants may have needed specialist learning support which was not made available to him; Tiny



and Carlton were on the wrong course because of inadequate guidance and Bonehead may have benefited from more consistent pastoral support.

Inspire's approach to support was the most individualised. Each learner's progress was reviewed on a monthly basis and those learners who were struggling were given weekly tutorials. As described earlier, Inspire provided detailed and consistent support for the two struggling learners in the cohort, Jake and Show-off, based upon trying to meet their individual needs. Jake received support for his literacy difficulties and Show-off was given an opportunity to develop his more advanced academic abilities by training as a peer mentor.

The cases of the two learners clearly illustrate the extra problems that LACs face in education and how changes in personal circumstances can impact on their achievement in spite of the institutional mechanisms in place to support them.

## Chapter seven - Conclusions

### 7.1 Introduction

In this final chapter I intend to review the research questions, and the knowledge contribution made by the research. I will then evaluate the limitations of my study; reflect upon its implications for my own future professional development; make recommendations regarding opportunities for future research and draw some conclusions about the effectiveness of the Diploma as a qualification.

### 7.2 Review of research questions

#### Why did the learners in this study choose the Diploma above other qualifications?

The majority of them had little real understanding of the course content, assessment methods or progression routes open to them after completing the course. Most of them had some knowledge of vocational courses per se, however, and were clearly in support of them in principle. Their specific knowledge of the Diploma was drawn from a series of official, quasi-official and anecdotal sources and they were attracted to it because of its vocational, practical and career-related nature. These factors were important to them as consistently they articulated their dislike of the academic, classroom-based subjects at which they had struggled whilst at school.

In particular, they were attracted to the Diploma course because it was 'new', vocational (and therefore not school-based and academic), 'about the real world', career-related and practical in essence. Their perceptions of it were consistent with the findings of Golden et al. 2004 ;Golden and Donnell 2006 and Marston–Smith et al. 2010. This created problems for some of the learners later in the programme when they were introduced to the units related to applied theory and the Functional Skills elements to which some of them reacted with anxiety and hostility, as described in Chapter Five. The cases of Tiny and Carlton at Learntrade were clear examples of 'mismatch' and serve to underline the importance of 'the right learner on the right course' and the consequences of poor initial advice.

Which teaching and learning methods did they find most appropriate and why?

The study by Baird et al. (2010) into teaching less motivated learners placed great emphasis on the quality of teaching as a motivating factor. In their research this centred on diversity of teaching methods and low teaching-input and high learner participation in classes. Their preferred methods seemed to be group work, discussions and kinaesthetic activities. Their ideal teacher's role was that of facilitator. Their conclusions are supported by OfSTED (2009) and Illeris (2007). My study concurs with these conclusions and in those centres, where those methods were most in evidence (Leon College and Inspire), respondents were most positive about the quality of teaching. Learners at Learntrade were far more critical of the teaching methods, finding them didactic and lacking in variation. In my analysis of teaching and learning in Chapter Five I evaluated these methods in the curriculum areas of skills acquisition, applied theory and knowledge, and Functional Skills in order to discuss the strengths and weaknesses in each centre's approaches.

Was the type of support they received on the programme significant to their experiences on the programme?

Providing effective learner support was always going to be a key priority for all the centres on the programme. Many researchers (Best 2002; DCFS 2007; Tennard et al. 2008; Bysshe et al. 2008; Swift et al. 2009 and Gracey and Kelly 2010) have suggested that disaffected learners tend to respond more positively to individualised tutorial support as a means of motivation and engagement. This was re-emphasised in my discussions with learners who complained throughout the year about the lack of personal support they received whilst at school. During my investigation of tutorial systems at the three centres in Chapter Six, three models of provision emerged: the Action Planning model, the Academic Learning Manager model and the Peer Mentor model. I evaluated the effectiveness of each centre's support in the following areas: directed learning, planning and over-seeing the completion of planning, academic supervision and vocational guidance.

The Action Planning model was used in Leon College and in spite of its lack of popularity amongst some staff members at the college; it was favoured by the learners in the cohort. According to them the strongest features of this model were: one hour group, tutorials, the availability of ad hoc individual meetings with their

tutors, class teachers who were also their tutors and the use of e-learning plans and vocational guidance given by those with specialised knowledge. They were least happy with the academic supervision provided on the course and said they would have preferred fewer group tutorials and more opportunities for individual support.

Leartrade's Academic Learning Manager (ALM) worked part-time with the learners as a 'learning coach' whose role it was to support their work and to track their achievements through rigid goal-setting based on ten success achievement criteria. This approach was only partially successful with the cohort at the centre. They were very satisfied with the level of academic support given to them but had mixed opinions about the level of support they received in their goal planning partly because the ALM was not a member of the teaching team and partly because of the low level of vocational guidance they received because of his lack of industrial experience.

According to my respondents Inspire was the most effective institution at providing tutorial support. Learners at this centre tended to describe themselves as self-directed and self-motivated. Inspire's usage of the peer mentoring model had been established for a long time in their centre and had been very effective on short courses. During 2011 this model was piloted on the Diploma. Learners at the centre were enthusiastic about the support provided by peer mentors. Overall what they were responding to was the peer-led, individualised support provided on a consistent and structured basis by the Inspire team.

### **7.3 Contribution to knowledge**

This research set out to explore the learning experiences of three sets of learning in three different education institutions embarking on the first year of a Level One vocational course, the Diploma. It aimed to analyse their ideas and perspectives on a range of issues, relating to past educational experiences, motivation, learning and teaching and support. The study makes a number of key inter-connected contributions to the field of inquiry.

The main contribution of this research was that it has added to our understanding of the 'forgotten half' (Birdwell et al. 2011) of the learner population, those learners who

have struggled through mainstream schooling and who have left school without the 'gold standard' of five GCSEs grades A\* to C. It has highlighted, in particular, the hopes, the anxieties and the struggles of learners who had left education and who were seeking a way back into the system. It has also furthered our knowledge of the barriers and the limited opportunities which Level One learners encounter in the post-16 sector.

The study has also developed awareness of the contested nature of vocational pedagogy (Young 2004), exploring how theory is related to practice by scrutinising and evaluating the teaching strategies in three post-16 centres through the eyes of the learners themselves. In doing so, it has enhanced understanding of the most successful teaching methods that can be used to re-engage young learners such as positive learning communities, confident and coherent approaches to programme delivery; interactive teaching methods which favoured group-work and collaboration and a centre ethos which encouraged a sense of community and togetherness and a sense of mutual engagement and sociality. In essence, the results re-emphasise the importance of the quality of teaching as a prime motivating factor in educating the more disengaged learner.

Thirdly, methodologically, the study makes a contribution to the field by adopting a comparative approach in carrying out empirical research across three sites of learning. A major issue to emerge from this research study is the different learning trajectories undergone by the three cohorts on the same vocational programme in the public, the quasi-private and the private sectors of post-16 education. Earlier literature in the field of education has discussed the construction of young disengaged students' responses to post-16 schooling mainly in the state sector. This research draws upon those literatures and extends those notions via a cross-comparison between three sectors of post-16 education in order to highlight the complexity of the differences in young learners' experiences. There was clear evidence that young people, who were disengaged from the mainstream secondary school curriculum, were actively engaged in the learning opportunities offered by the AE in all three sectors which were researched. Arguably, their experiences of and responses to teaching and learning were shaped by the pedagogical conditions in each site. Most significantly, this was illustrated in the case of the virtual PRU where

the young learners were given the opportunities to develop learning identities through personalised support.

Finally, the study has been instrumental in developing understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of broad vocational qualifications. Previous research had highlighted key design, pedagogic and assessment issues attached to the Diploma (Hodgson and Spours 2008 and Isaacs 2013). This research confirms many of its strengths as a means of engaging learners who had recently returned to education. There were clear indications in the study that the Diploma's fusion of theory and practical skills played a key role in engaging the less engaged learners in all three centres and helped to further develop their identities as learners.

#### **7.4 Critical reflection on the limitations of the study**

I have undertaken a single in-depth investigation using multiple case-studies and using multiple methods of data collection in an attempt to produce a rich picture or 'thick description' (Hammersley 2008) of learner experiences on the Diploma programme.

I understood from the outset that such an approach could lead to over-simplifications or exaggerations in my study area and could also mislead the readers into thinking that I have presented the whole picture rather than a small part of it (Hammersley 1992). There are a number of factors which may have some bearing on the trustworthiness of the results. It is to these I now will turn.

##### The size of the sample

In my research study I used only 36 learners as prime respondents in addition to a small number of staff members.

This was a purposive sample using non-random methods in order to explore a particular sub-group (Grbich 1999), previously disengaged learners studying on the Diploma at Foundation Level in Construction and the Built Environment (C&BE). I chose a limited number of respondents partly because of my limited resources and mainly because I believed that a larger sample would have compromised the richness and depth of my data as I would have had less time for in-depth interviews

and group interviews which formed the basis of my work (Wolcott 1984). The question which often arises when assessing the importance of a small-scale study such as this is 'To what extent can its findings be generalised?' (Hammersley 1992). It could also be argued that if the study has no general relevance beyond the local circumstances within which it was produced, it will have no non-local audience and hence its power to provide a picture of general concern would be minimised (Hammersley 2008).

I would like to suggest that the results of my study can be generalised. The three centres I researched were selected on the grounds of 'typicality'. They were typical of the FE sector in terms of size, programmes offered and resources. They were also located in an area of London which has common features with other inner-city areas in London and in the United Kingdom as a whole in terms of relative deprivation, socio-economic mix and so on. I was very aware of the issues of homogeneity when I constructed my research design as:

There is little point in selecting a population...if it is likely that the features we are studying are so heterogeneous within it that generalisation from our investigation is likely to be ill-founded (Hammersley 1992: 88).

In order to address this issue I selected a sample of respondents, learners deemed as NEET, who shared common characteristics amongst the group and with other learners in this category according to published research (Morris and Pullen 2007; Tennard et al. 2008; Swift et al. 2009; Gracey and Kelly 2010 and Perry and Francis 2010).

In Hammersley's book '*Questioning Qualitative Inquiry*' (2008), he suggested a series of what he called 'considerations' for assessing qualitative research. When he discussed the notion of validity in research findings he suggested that one 'consideration' could be:

The relationships between the findings about the case studies and the conclusions drawn:  
a. Where these are empirical generalisations about some finite population, on the basis of whatever evidence is provided, are they sufficiently plausible or credible to be accepted?(2008: 163)

I hope that my generalisations from this study have been 'sufficiently plausible or credible' (2008: 163).

#### The duration of the study

I am aware that studies of short duration, as in my case, one academic year, tend to produce exaggerated pictures and hence weaken the validity of my conclusions (Denzin 2003). It could be argued that a lengthier study might have allowed me to analyse the development of my respondents as learners in more detail and to explore the teaching and learning approaches in more depth. I deliberately chose only to review the progress of learners over one academic year partly again because of limited resources but mainly because I wanted to chart their experiences within a feasible single enclosed time-frame from beginning to a natural end. I was also interested in analysing how the institutions themselves would cope in what was for them a pilot year of the programme.

#### The interview as a data gathering method

The usage of interviews as a primary method of gathering data has been heavily criticised on several grounds: 'reactivity', 'socio-cultural variation', 'orientation change' and 'artificiality' (Atkinson and Coffey 2002: 61). According to Hammersley (2008): 'Some of the critics seem to imply that interview data can only tell us what goes on in interviews or perhaps went on in a particular interview' (Hammersley 2008: 89).

Working from Hammersley's four categories of interview data, my interviews have provided me with 'witness accounts', 'self-analyses' and 'indirect sources of informants' orientations' (Hammersley 2008: 89). I have been especially conscious of 'reactivity' i.e. the possibility that interviewees may be driven by a desire to 'perform' for me, or driven by a preoccupation with self-presentation. I know from teaching experience that many young learners have an 'image' that they continuously seek to project and protect (Silverman 2007). From my journalistic training and experience in news reporting I have learned over many years never to take what has been said in an interview context at face value.



I was very aware that one of the main problems with working intimately with such a small respondent sample would be that of researcher neutrality. Over the entire research period, about 18 months in total, I have been in constant contact with many of my respondents in person, via e-mail and via social communication sites. Some of my respondents I had known briefly prior to the study because of my involvement in various local educational projects. I felt that I needed to develop close working relationships with them in order to gain their trust (which was an obvious barrier because of the firmly grounded suspicions of teachers); their compliance with the study (asking them to complete extra written tasks was always going to be problematic!) and especially because I wanted to obtain their honest opinions and then to represent them as faithfully as I could in their own words. This was a central aim for me at the outset of the study. This presented me from the beginning of the study with the questions raised by Becker (1967) about neutrality, research bias and essentially, whether it can ever be valid to take sides.

Having worked with disadvantaged young people like those in my study for most of my working career, the questions of my deep-rooted 'sympathies' towards them (this sounds patronising but isn't intended to be) and the potential impact it might have upon my data gathering and my findings became important for me to wrestle with throughout the entire project.

I was constantly aware that my sympathy towards my respondents could have undermined my professional integrity but at the same time, I was clear that empathy was vital in this case.

My central method of data gathering was interviewing and thus, I had to feel, relate and become 'involved' with my interviewees in order to analyse effectively what they were experiencing and let the data; their thoughts and feelings 'speak for themselves'. In my research I tried to work from the premise that:

There is a link between openness, warmth, the capacity to be sympathetic and the depth at which the research process operates. The more effective the research in terms of shared feelings and experiences, the better the field work gets done on the whole (Liebling 2001: 475).

I strove not to compromise my objectivity and have tended not to take what has been said to me in interviews and group interviews as obvious in meaning and implication and relied upon a series of triangulations; classroom observations, discussions with teachers and follow up interviews in order to seek out different perspectives on the same 'truths' and to draw as complete a picture as possible. Ultimately, however, my research was grounded on the perspectives of the individual respondents and my main task was to represent as clearly as possible their 'truths'.

My main interviewing approach was using semi-structured or unstructured questions. As the research proceeded I endeavoured to develop an interviewing strategy called the objectifying interview (Sjoberg and Nett 1968) which I felt would be more flexible and dynamic and involved me in a process of not simply obtaining answers from my respondents but also learning what were the right questions to ask them and how to ask them in a way that enabled me to represent their viewpoints with accuracy.

I endeavoured to create situations in which my respondents:

Besides examining his (or her) own actions, the interviewee...is encouraged to observe and interpret the behaviour of his associates in his own social group. Ideally he becomes a peer with whom the scientist can objectively discuss the on-going system, to the extent to which he is encouraged to criticise the scientist's observations and interpretations (Sjoberg and Nett 1968: 214).

During group interviews I encouraged debates about teaching sessions and tutorials which I had observed or discussed with my respondents individually. This helped to triangulate my findings and also made my respondents feel they were an 'active participant' in the process rather than part of 'an experiment in education'. I also used a narrative style of interviewing (Jarchevlovitch and Bauer 2007) and made minimal interventions in the interviews allowing my interviewees to speak without interruptions. I have included some of these responses, partially edited for length, in my study, in order to preserve the integrity and the honesty of the opinions expressed.

I also read back transcripts of interviews to my respondents on a regular basis and allowed them to comment on their accuracy or to clarify what they had previously

stated. This enabled me to code the meanings more accurately, organise the information and draw more coherent conclusions from the data (Fontana and Frey 1994). This also helped me to resolve contradictions in answers as my interviewees, on occasion, changed their minds over issues or how they perceived particular situations, sometimes within the space of a few days.

## **7.5 implications for future personal professional development**

### *Self-image as an obstacle to learning*

This issue became very clear to me during the initial stages of interviewing. Many of the cohort shared similar cognitive/social and behavioural characteristics in relation to their learning. Underlying these were mostly negative attitudes to their own ability to learn and in general, a weak sense of locus of control. This had a noticeable impact on their behaviour. This is a common problem amongst learners who are deemed as NEET according to Siraj-Blatchford et al (2011):

Children who experienced learning difficulties and were not seen as particularly clever often developed a negative self-image, resulting in or reinforcing ineffective problem-solving strategies, diminished motivation for school and learning and a sense of helplessness. This negative perception of children's ability was reinforced by the perception of parents and children that 'ability to learn' was a 'given' rather than something that could be shaped (2011: 5).

Much of the teaching struggles in the three centres were based upon overcoming these motivational barriers by developing the self-confidence and self-efficacy of the learners. From my research I have learned the importance of designing different approaches to 'soft outcomes' (Byssche et al. 2008: 83) and of the necessity to enhance feelings of belonging in learners in order to develop their self-images and self-confidence. This was also confirmed by international research (OECD 2010). In my opinion, the most successful centre to achieve this was Inspire whose usage of one-to-one support was instrumental in developing learners' confidence and motivation over the course.

I will continue to investigate the effectiveness of individualised support and I am particularly interested in developing core skills through 'embedded enrichment' in the following areas which I see as key to the self –development of learners:

- Developing positive and supportive relationships with learners
- Exploring learners' values through challenges , dilemmas and situations
- Supporting Event-Mind-Reaction (EMR) and guided reflection in learners
- Fostering self-awareness (Oginsky 2008: 11)

### Embedding of Functional Skills

I was expecting to see various levels of effectiveness in the teaching of Functional Skills because of my own experiences observing PGCE trainees in my teaching context and from the reservations expressed about embedding Functional Skills in vocational courses from the Wolf Review (2011). From the classes I have observed and from the interviews I have conducted over the study, it is obvious to me that teachers are still struggling with developing learners' abilities to apply Functional Skills in practical 'real-life' contexts, in spite of their achievements in this area. Leon College seemed to me the most effective in this area as it drew heavily upon its experience of fully embedding Key Skills into vocational subjects and through its use of interactive classroom activities and e-learning. I am fully aware of the potential drawbacks of this approach as explained by Wolf (2011):

Vocational teachers know about vocational subjects. They are not Maths or English teachers (2011: 171).

I will continue to explore alternative approaches to teaching Functional Skills and to investigate ways in which I can promote autonomous learning in this area.

### Peer teaching/peer mentoring

I have been impressed by the usage of peer teaching at Inspire as a means of motivating and supporting young disaffected learners. Its benefits as a method of active teaching and learning have been much discussed (Vygotsky 1976; Capstick et al. 2004 and Trowler and Trowler 2010) and include the following:

- Enhanced motivation
- Improved cognitive and collaborative skills
- Enhanced ownership of learning
- Improved meta-cognitive skills

As a result of my initial encounters with this approach I decided to become involved in a project with an East London Sixth Form College in September 2012 which was piloting the use of peer teachers across the curriculum.

### **7.6 Recommendations for future research**

The findings of my study provided for me the following insights into future research. In the first instance, I feel it would be interesting to extend the study over more FE institutions using a larger sample of learners or to target a specific group of NEETs, for example, young people with disabilities or young females with children. This would raise interesting issues around access to education and the provision of individualised support.

Comparisons could also be made across different parts of the country to ascertain whether there are regional variations and how these variations impact on the effectiveness of provision.

I would also like to focus more on particular areas of my current study, for instance, teaching or tutorial strategies and analyse how effective these may be for disengaged learners studying on academic courses rather than vocational courses.

It could also prove fruitful to examine the effectiveness of larger private training companies in providing education for young disaffected adults across a range of vocational areas and to chart developments in teaching strategies, especially e-learning which were very weak in the training provider which I discussed in my study.

I believe the issue of peer tutoring/mentoring/teaching could also be explored more fully. In my study I discussed its effectiveness as a means of support and motivation in the context of a small 'virtual Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)'. It could be useful to

expand research into its effectiveness in larger mainstream educational institutions, focussing on areas like recruitment, training, etc. I would also consider extending the study of support for those 'at risk' across a wider variety of institutions and different categories of NEETs, possibly focussing on different categories of individuals and particular systems of support.

### **7.7 Final comments on the Diploma**

Since their inception the 14-19 Diplomas had been criticised for flaws in design, structure, content and assessment and their lack of clarity in terms of definition and purpose (Hodgson and Spours 2008; Smithers and Robinson 2008; Atkins 2010; Macdonald Ross 2010; Keep 2012 and Birdwell et al. 2011). Ultimately, they suffered as a result of poor take-up and achievement. Since they began in 2008, only 55,000 learners enrolled on them and under 12,000 learners completed the programmes (Isaacs 2013). Following *'The Wolf Review'* (2011), the government began to transform vocational education with a much publicised publication of the lists in 2012 and 2013 of vocational and non-GCSE qualifications which would be the only ones to be recognised in school and performance tables for 2014.

Each qualification would now only be equivalent to one GCSE instead of four or five under the previous system. Included on the list for Level One qualifications were much stripped down versions of the Diploma in Construction and the Built Environment, a Certificate in Principal Learning in Construction and the Built Environment and a BTEC Certificate in Construction (DFE 2012). Key examining body, OCR, stopped offering the Diploma in C&BE and its final awards were in August 2014.

The verdict on the Diploma seems to have been passed. From the results of my study, however, I would like to suggest that the Diploma had not been 'a disaster waiting to happen' (Smithers and Robinson 2008: 2) and that it has had some success with many of my respondents. For many of my interviewees completing the first year constituted their first academic achievement. By their own admissions, the Diploma course was the first they actually enjoyed undertaking.

The Diploma shared many of the features of a successful vocational qualification suggested by Dewey and Young such as a flexible inter-related structure, contextual/coherence and Powerful Knowledge, blending the practical and theoretical which many of my respondents responded positively to.

QCA (2009) argued that the Diploma, in particular, demanded more specialised relevant learning than academic courses. According to the report on the first year of the Diploma by Lynch et al. (2010), the Diploma was welcomed overall, particularly because of the varied learning experiences and transferable skills learners gained. Many of the respondents felt that what they were learning was relevant to their futures and this was very motivating

The 2009 OfSTED report suggested that students in almost all the consortia visited were very motivated by the applied nature of their learning and the opportunity to work in realistic vocational contexts. Learners in all three centres in my research study said that the practical sessions on the course were to them: more enjoyable, more engaging and more likely to have an impact on the development of their understanding and skills.

In spite of the initial problems identified by Lynch et al (2010) and OfSTED 2009, the embedding and wedding of theory and practice seemed to be a great strength of the course for many of my respondents. In Chapter Five I showed how the learning activities even within the more theoretical units of the Diploma were mostly effective and the learners said they enjoyed and were challenged by much of the work.

The centrality of Functional Skills within the Diploma was seen as problematic by OfSTED (2009) and Baird et al. (2010) and was arguably one of the main reasons why over all achievements were so weak (Isaacs 2013). Many of my respondents felt, however, that they benefited from this compulsory subject as they would never had tried to improve their English and Mathematics, otherwise. This was especially the case in Leon College and in Inspire where Functional Skills were taught fully embedded and mostly embedded.

The Diploma also had psychological and affective benefits for these young people as it developed their confidence as learners and, in many cases, gave them the motivation to continue to study. The following comments taken from some of the learners serve to adequately summarise many of their views on the completion of year one:

*'I thought I was a no- hoper when it can to learning. This course has made me think again what I can achieve'* (Sam, Leon College).

*'What did I learn from this course? Apart from all the academic stuff about Construction and English and Maths I learned how to behave in class. I got 100% for my attendance and 100% for punctuality. I never got this in my whole life'* (Ants, Learntrade).

*'When I started this course I just did it to get my parents off my back. Any course would have done then. I figured that I would do it for a few months and when they lay off me I would quit. But the more I carried on, the more I started to learn and it made sense to me. I started to pass assignments with good grades and realised that I wasn't so useless at academics after all. Everyone had faith in me and I worked hard because I didn't want to let them down. I learned so much about myself. What I was capable of doing. This was probably the most important thing I've ever done in my life. Now I think I can do anything'* (Ghost, Inspire).



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### Appendix A- Sample Interview schedule

Interviewee/date/time	My Comments
Introduction: <i>'My name is Paul. As you know I'm researching the Diploma in C&amp;BE at this college. Thanks for agreeing to this interview. Everything you say will be treated confidentially and I will not be identifying you by name in my write up or anywhere else. If you do not want to answer a question, please tell me and we will move on to another. I will be happy to show you my interview notes when I have written them up, if you so wish.'</i>	
Warm up questions: general well-being, football results, their interests.	
What did you enjoy most about today's class? What did you enjoy the least?	
Which subjects are you enjoying most? Which the least?	
How do you feel you are progressing on the course? Is it meeting your expectations?	
How are you getting on with your course work?	
Questions specifically related to their day, for example classroom incidents, etc.	

## Appendix B-Interview with Oberon- March 2011

I. The first school you went to was (local school)? What was it like at\_\_

O. Fairly s..t

I. Why? What was the problem?

O. Them

I. Who do you mean?

O. the teachers

I. what did they do?

O. Never listened

I. Why do you think that?

O. they never liked me from the off

I. Why do you feel that?

O. I wasn't the worst behaved in the class but they were always in my face...

I. what do you mean by that?

O. you know had a go for little things ...saying I wasn't working when I was...

I. so what did you do?

O. had a go back then they'd send me out to see Mr. C (the head teacher)

I. then what?

O. he'd give me some b...s....t and I'd go back to class

I. how did you feel when you went back?

O. Pissed off because I never did anything

I. when did you start bunking?

O. From year seven ...

I. Every lesson?

O. no, just things like PE and Maths because they really hated me there ...and then loads of lessons

I. Was it anything different when you went to\_\_( a different local school)

O. It started off ok but then it was the same s t

I. In what way?

O. Everyone on my back,

I. So what did you do?

O. Never went in

I. How did you feel about this?

O. Not happy ...it was boring during the day and I wanted to learn but I got vexed

I. How could it have been better for you?

O. Maybe if they would've been calmer with me

I. How long were you there?

O. My mum found me a new school at Christmas

I. that was\_\_\_\_( third school) ? Yeah?

O. Yeah.

I. Was it better there then?

O. Yeah it was alright there...some of the teachers were ok

I. Why ok?

O. You could talk to them ...have a laugh sometimes

Appendix C- Short hand notes from interview with Oberon-March 2011

Appendix H.

Zi Oberon ~~STH~~

M: I feel like u w 2 wov w wst  
 I k?

O: ja that

M: y? w w t prob?

O: them.

M: oo du m?

O: t teemen.

M: w ch tha dnt?

O: m hnt?

I: y du k th?

O: Min m hnt m fm t of

I: y du f m

O: I was I w e behind in class by the  
 way. always on m case

I: w ch m b m?

O: U o, an a go A lttl go. oa/  
 I wnt wky w I was

I: oo w chd fr dlo?

O: an a go back tht oa m l c  
 (Mr ~~STH~~)



## Appendix C- (continued)

2/

O: her go me semi bullshit and I w/ g bck  
 I ou did u j w y w bck?

O: prol y bco I d aff-

I w did u ~~an~~ b ~~k~~?

O: j yr 7

I: ew lew.

O: N je go like PE & Mth bco tha  
 red any in the s th loan g  
 lessons

I: wh it e dy w u w l ~~PER~~

O: t ~~any~~ g OK b W u was I.  
 Jan shut

I: n-w wa?

O: ew was on m bck.

I: s w d u do?

O: ~~as~~ w in

I: ou d u j boy ths?

O: N ap/ y was ba dnt l aa s  
 I w/ to learn by I q Vesced

I: ouz u u aw her better / q u?

O: -Plab jf tha wi calmer was in?  
 I: ou ~~j~~ w u ths?



## Appendix D – Annotated Interview with Jake (February 2011)

In the car parking area in front of the building

I: Could you give me your name for the recording?

J: Jake

I: is this your first time here?

J: Nah. My carer sent me on a weekend course to learn English here in the Summer and I thought it was ok.

**Comment [p1]:** Struggled with English.

**Comment [p2]:** Previous knowledge of centre

I. How did you learn about the Diploma ?

J. Miss Olivia came to speak to my carer about it first. Then she talked to me about it. I wasn't interested at first and then Miss Olivia came back to talk to me with my carer and I changed my mind.

**Comment [p3]:** Impact of Miss Olivea ?

**Comment [p4]:** What did the teacher do ?

I: What did she tell you about it then ?

J: well she said it was a new construction course that'd give me a qualification to get a job and that I'd learn English and Maths on it too.

**Comment [p5]:** Vocational knowledge

**Comment [p6]:** A career option ?

**Comment [p7]:** English and maths

I: So what made you change your mind?

J: I was bored doing nothing really... and I know that construction is a good game to get into because people always need houses

**Comment [p8]:** Motivation to escape boredom

**Comment [p9]:** A future career

I: Did it help you had been to Inspire before?

**Comment [p10]:** Previous knowledge of centre

J: Yeah...I wouldn't gone to college to do anything because it's too much like school

**Comment [p11]:** Doesn't see Inspire as a college?

**Comment [p12]:** Wanted something different

I: What was your first day like- your induction?

**Comment [p13]:** School& college same

**Comment [p14]:** induction

J: Alright. I was dead nervous about going back to education but everyone made us feel welcome. They talked to us about the course and stuff .Then we did an English and Maths test on the computers. I flopped the Maths one but no one had a go. Then we met our Peer Mentors. I got lucky. I got Chantelle .

**Comment [p15]:** initial nerves-because out of system for too long ? or because never happy there?

**Comment [p16]:** Feeling accepted

**Comment [p17]:** Non judgemental

I: You've been at Inspire now for three months now. How are you finding it?

**Comment [p18]:** importance of personal relationship with mentor

J: It's still alright

**Comment [p19]:** Still liking it.

I: what's best things about studying here ?

J: cause it's not like being at school ...you sit down on armchairs and you can smoke outside ..like this ....( laughing) ... everyone wants to help you

**Comment [p20]:** Anti school

**Comment [p21]:** More laid back in approach

**Comment [p22]:** Was it opposite at school

I: what was it like at school then?

**Comment [p23]:** Individual Support

J: Really s..t . I went to three schools but I bunked a lot

**Comment [p24]:** Poor attendance

I; why did you bunk ?

J: It was boring and the teachers were c...ts.

**Comment [p25]:** Irrelevant lessons ?

**Comment [p26]:** Lack of interest in lessons

I: what do you think of the teachers at Inspire?

**Comment [p27]:** Dislike of teachers

J: They're all cool and pretty helpful

**Comment [p28]:** Non-traditional possibly in this case ? or acceptable to him ?

I: Why cool?

**Comment [p29]:** Individual support

J: They are not in my face all the time but they're not soft either. You can't take the piss with them

**Comment [p30]:** Were teachers always in his face ?

**Comment [p31]:** Likes balance between support and strictness?

I: What about the Peer Mentors?

J: They're really good. They're like real teachers...

**Comment [p32]:** Not seen as auxiliary or secondary to teachers

I: Yeah?

J: They make me work harder than I ever done before

**Comment [p33]:** Believes he is working harder than at school ?

I: Why?

J; because they are always in my face ...you can't hide from them like you can sometimes in class

**Comment [p34]:** In his face in a good way -ie supportive ?

**Comment [p35]:** Did he used to hide in school ? used anonymity of class ?Likes to be part of things ?

I: what do you mean ?

J: I can't mess around when they're teaching other kids

I:Let's talk about your first assignment .How do you think it went ?

J: I didn't do well in it but Jade made me feel like I passed.

**Comment [p36]:** Emotion is important- For self-esteem

I: That's good! How ?

J: She told me ways how I could improve **it** so I could pass and we talked about how she could help when I have to re-submit it.

**Comment [p37]:** Practical support

I: What kinds of ways?

J: ...Get someone to read my work **first**, use spell check when I get stuck and don't guess! I **really** believed her.

**Comment [p38]:** Practical advice – which he remembered !

**Comment [p39]:** Emphatic really !

**Comment [p40]:** Does he normally doubt ?

I: Why?

**Comment [p41]:** This is important for him

J: It made a difference to me that he was only a few years **older** than me.

**Comment [p42]:** Awareness of small age gap – seen as a positive

I: How old is she?

J: About **20**? They are all young **here**. Apart from the teachers.

**Comment [p43]:** Awareness of rough age

I: Why does it make a difference to you ?

**Comment [p44]:** His perception of staff

J: She can understand what I'm going **through**. She's got a **kid**. She said she had a s...t time at school **too**. I came **away** thinking if she can do it why can't I?

**Comment [p45]:** Importance of belief that she has empathy

**Comment [p46]:** She is also mature and knows way of the world ?

**Comment [p47]:** Street wise ?

**Comment [p48]:** Can understand his situation better than other teachers ?

**Comment [p49]:** Moving forwards – optimistic

**Comment [p50]:** Role-model? Motivating factor ?

## **Appendix E-Reflective Journal**

Week beginning:

Which classes did you attend and what did you learn?

What did you do in class? How much did you enjoy it ?

How well did you behave?

How well did you think the week as a whole went at college?

**Appendix F-Reflective Journal (completed)**

Week beginning: February 19th

Which classes did you attend and what did you learn?

What did you do in class? How much did you enjoy it ?

The practical stuff is really good and even the theory isn't boring at all. I surprised myself because I find it ok .We learn about important things like construction materials and job roles. They all make it interesting because it's stuff we need to know when we leave and get jobs. Everything we learn has a point to it

How well did you behave?

I was quiet

How well did you think the week as a whole went at college?

A good week

**Appendix G-Reflective Journal (completed)**

Week beginning:

Which classes did you attend and what did you learn?

Didnt miss anything this week

What did you do in class? How much did you enjoy it ?

Builded my first wall. I was proud

How well did you behave?

I was good and listned

How well did you think the week as a whole went at college?

ok-ncompliant

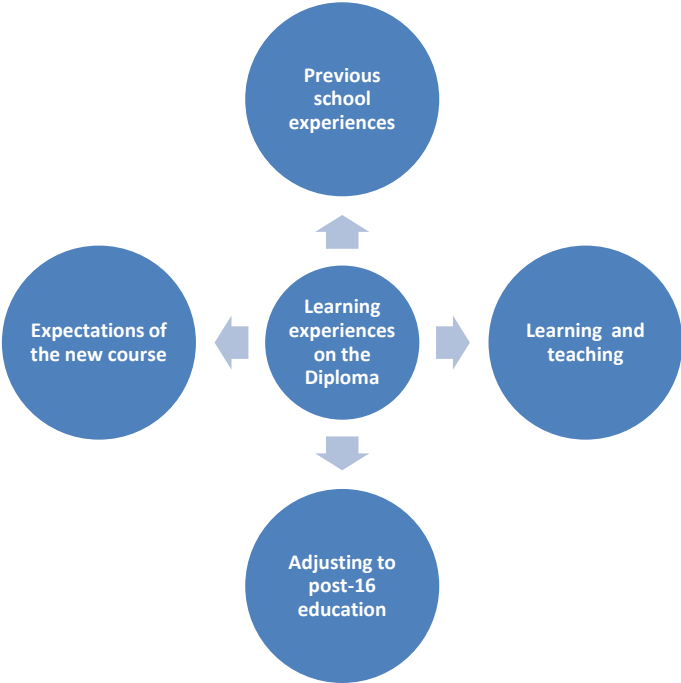
**Appendix H-Observation schedule to record learner actions in class**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Listens to teacher exposition		
Makes own notes with teacher guidance		
Teacher-led discussion of work		
Receives duplicated notes/handouts		

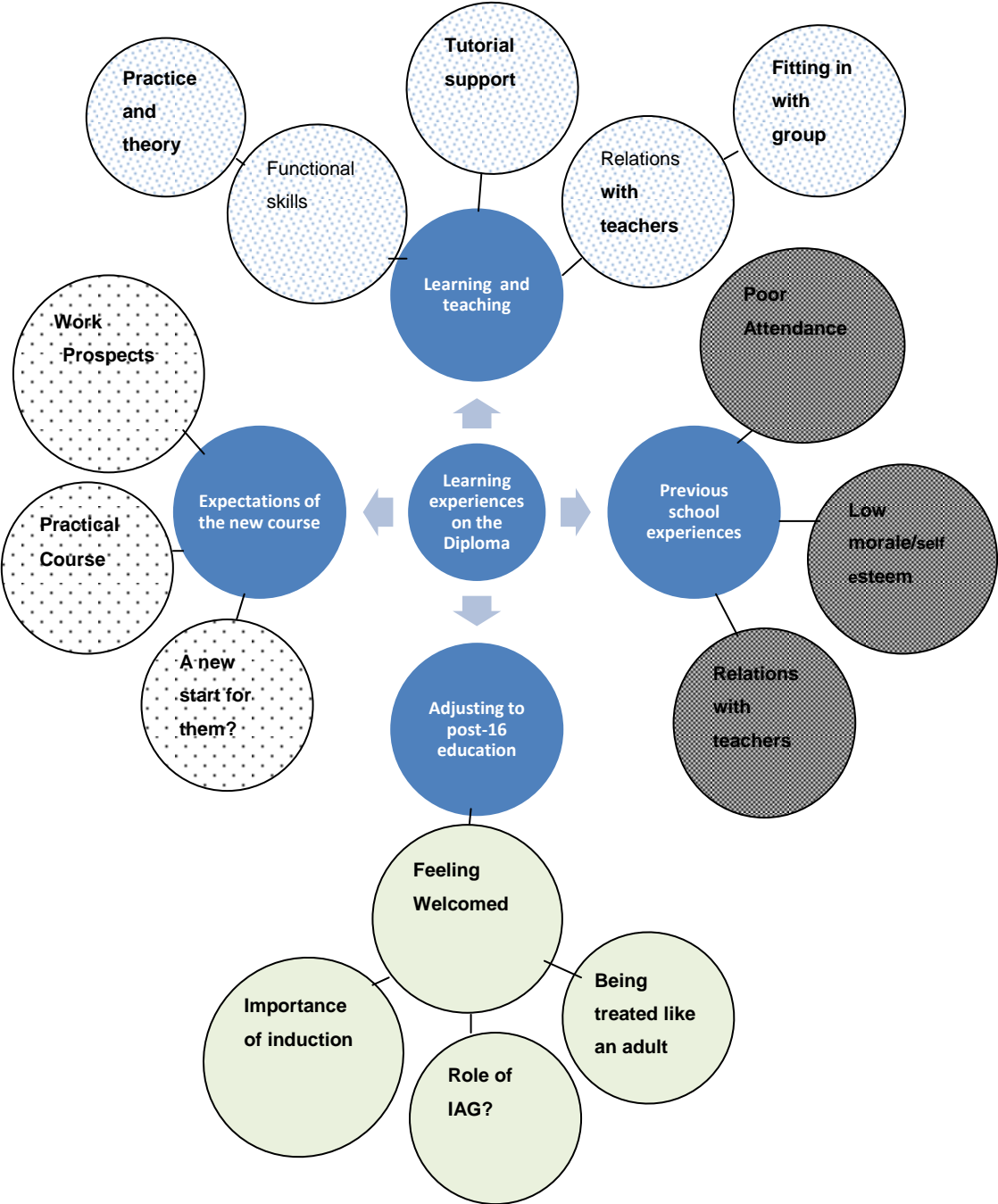
<b>Activity</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Uses worksheets		
Receives individual help from teacher		
Works on problem solving investigation		
Helps/receives help from another student		
Reads or undertakes research		



**Appendix I - Diagram of initial a priori codes**



AppendixJ-Diagram of multi-dimensional matrix with emergent codes



**Appendix K– Consent form**

**CONSENT FORM**

**NAME**

**DATE**

Has the purpose of the research project been explained to you? **Yes/No**

Have you been given an information sheet about the research? **Yes/No**

Have you been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project? **Yes/No**

Do you understand that you are free to leave at any time without giving an explanation?  
**Yes/No**

Do you understand that you have the right to ask for the recorder to be switched off at any point, and that you do not have to answer anything you do not wish to?  
**Yes/No**

Sessions will be recorded for the purposes of the researcher alone. Access to recordings will be limited to the researcher and two research supervisors and will not be included in full in the final written record of the research. Quotations may be used in presentations or related documentation, but participants in the research will not be identified by name at any time.

**I agree to take part in this research project.**

**Signed** .....

**Date**.....

## **Reflective statement**

I have found the programme progressively challenging on an academic, intellectual and professional level and yet progressively more stimulating and enlightening leading to my self-growth as a teacher over the past seven years.

## **Academic and intellectual development**

My first assignment was for the Foundations of Professionalism (FoP) module. The title of it was 'The changing definitions of Professionalism'. The module enabled me to explore my own professional identity and I felt able to re-conceptualise many of my doubts and to place them in a wider sector context. Within my essay I attempted to explore the 'amoebic' nature of professionalism in the Further Education sector. In the second half of the essay I conducted a small scale case study which involved interviewing colleagues in my own institution teaching on pre-16 programmes in order to ascertain their own impressions of their changing professional identity. Whilst researching and writing the essay, I formulated the idea for my next assignment, Methods of Inquiry 1 (MoE1).

MoE1 was a research design based on the responses of eight under-16 learners studying at my institution. It was inspired by a desire to investigate another aspect of the 14-19 vocational initiatives, the experiences of the young learners themselves. In the assignment I was given the opportunity to explore a variety of methodological approaches to data gathering and analyses. This was personally relevant to me as part of my academic development as I had not undertaken any research since I had written my M.A. dissertation over 14 years ago. The module helped me to define researchable questions and to develop suitable theoretical frameworks. The analysis of research studies which I undertook as part of the module helped me to clarify confusions about what constituted research designs and the often over-complicated technical terms which seem to bedevil academic writing about research methodology. Why this is still the case continues to baffle me?

A key theme which emerged from my research for the essay was my attempt to evaluate the possibilities of empowering my future respondents by allowing them to

participate actively in the research process, breaking down the hierarchical relationship of interviewer and interviewee. This proved to be sound preparation for the research project itself which was conducted for the next assignment, Methods of Inquiry 2 (MoE 2).

MoE2 was a narrative and explanation of the progress of my respondents on various Level Two courses over a six-month period. The eight interviewees I selected proved to be very enthusiastic and willing to participate in the project, helping to make the data gathering relatively unproblematic for me, even if at times, because of my inexperience at handling unstructured qualitative data, I found it too fragmentary to process and analyse. The feedback which I received from both markers was congratulatory with regards to my attempts to use my interviewees as participant researchers and to allow my interviewees to set some of the research agenda. This gave me the confidence to apply similar approaches in my thesis. The module ultimately gave me an excellent practical grounding in qualitative research methods and their applications. In particular, it helped me to develop a tentative understanding of what constituted achievable research questions and how to select appropriate research methods.

Clear tutor feedback during MoE2 discussions helped me to develop my ideas about using interviewing as a research tool and where to locate it in a methodological framework. I was also prompted to explore the avenues of ethnography within a sociological framework in order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of studying future interviewees in their 'natural settings'. Although strictly speaking I failed to justify the identification of my research as 'ethnographic' in both my MoE1 and MoE2 assignments, I used this approach broadly in my Institutional Focussed Study (IFS) and in my thesis. Feedback from my then tutor also prompted me to investigate using a range of data collecting methods such as observation, on-line conversation and video recording. The latter ideas had an immediate impact on me because of my reporting background and the results of these were used in my MoE2 and IFS reports but I feel that I failed to justify adequately the systems I used in the assignments themselves.

Contemporary Education Policy (CEP) was a module which proved to be very relevant to me in shaping my understanding of the context of vocational education. My research into the 14-19 policy agenda did provide me with a greater understanding of wider policy trends in education both at national and global level. It also allowed me to probe into a variety of new perspectives on education, sociological, historical and economic, which aided my thinking in the Institutional Focussed Study (IFS) and on my thesis.

The IFS was a great challenge for me as it was the first detailed research project I had ever undertaken. I decided to push myself out of my comfort zone and work across several institutions instead of simply working with my own colleagues for this research. This widened the scope of my research and gave me the opportunity to experience other FE settings. I wanted to investigate the professional development (PD) of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) trainees.

I continued to work with a qualitative paradigm using a case study based upon an individual East London college and a small sample of respondents. I also used the opportunity to develop my data gathering techniques over a longer period, nine months, using structured and semi-structured questions, surveys and a reflective journal. The IFS allowed me to continue to experiment with developing my role as an insider researcher which I had piloted in MoE2 and to extend my understanding of it. In retrospect, I tend to concur with the comments made by one of my markers during written feedback that my writing style tended 'towards being a dispassionate outsider researcher' and that I made very little of some of my respondents being my own PGCE students.

Writing the IFS made me realise for the first time that research could have a practical impact on working practices. It allowed me to look at important issues in my workplace and to seek real solutions to those complex problems by listening to staff members. I was able to give voice to genuine concerns about initial training for new staff members and to recommend realistic changes to college policy.

The culmination of the programme was the thesis. This was a major academic and personal challenge for me as it coincided with a variety of changes both at my work

place and in my home life and hence, it proved to be a major uphill struggle. I felt that I was reasonably well equipped for the task as I was able to draw upon my previous research attempts in MoE2 and the IFS but to some extent, underestimated the complexity of the task. I tried to be mindful of some of the recurring problems with my work, confusion over methodology, consistent presentational issues, lack of clarity over generalisability, poor academic style, but at times was overwhelmed by work and home problems.

I used my thesis to extend my research attempts into the 14-19 curriculum which I have previously written about in MoE1, MoE2 and CEP by concentrating upon the much criticised Diploma and the experiences of disaffected learners on the programme. From my previous studies I had acquired a reasonable working knowledge of the policies and practices of the vocational curriculum for under 16s and I decided to investigate this in more detail by trying to gauge a deeper understanding of it by looking at it from the learners' points of view.

Building upon the ethnographic approaches I experimented with in MoE2 and the IFS, I was keen to portray a picture of the 'real world' of the course and involved my respondents as much as possible in the research process. I allowed them to read and correct interview notes, consulted them about possible lines of questioning and tried to incorporate their actual stories in my thesis. I feel that I did this more successfully within the wider scope of the thesis than I had done before.

When my thesis was referred in June 2013, it felt like a huge blow to my academic confidence. Initially I felt very disheartened especially after my poor performance in the Viva where nerves got the better of me and I felt I was unable to make a strong enough case for my research and to do justice to my findings. Re-writing my thesis over the past year was a tremendous struggle for me in the context of a very turbulent year at home and at work.

The examiners informed me that there were many areas in my thesis that needed amending, but that the central problems lay in my literature review and methodology chapters. It was suggested to me that I review my understanding of a variety of key concepts in my literature review: 'vocational education', 'learner journey',

'disaffection' and my approaches to 'giving voice' to my respondents. I focussed my reading on researchers suggested by the examiners. These included Michael Young, Andy Furlong, Martin Bloomer, Phil Hodgkinson and Lorna Unwin. I tried to read as widely as possible around my core authors and to disentangle the debates, some of which I could connect with and some which I found too obtuse. I re-wrote my literature review substantially to accommodate these perspectives. I feel that it is much stronger as a result of my extra effort and feel that I do have stronger understanding of the wider contexts of my thesis which I do not have before.

I was also requested to re-organise and restructure my methodology chapter which according to the examiners lacked specific detail in particular areas, noticeably the research design and my approaches to data collection. There were also certain questions raised about inconsistencies in my answers during the viva (which I still feel were the result of my nervousness and confusion during the examination) that I had to resolve in the chapter. I decided to revisit the chapter and drawing upon the feedback of the examiners final report and the support of my supervisor I attempted to provide a fuller account of my methodology and my analyses. I concentrated specifically upon documenting my data, producing a number of appendices to support my explanations of the data gathering and analysis processes. Whilst I went through the summarising of data, I was reminded of the difficulties I had encountered in obtaining it and how much I had accumulated. I also learned more about the importance of authenticating the ground work of my research and of validating my data gathering methods in order to support my conclusions. I believe that these were valuable lessons for me to take away and to apply to any future research project that I may choose to embark upon.

As I write this, I am still uncertain about the strength of my thesis and still have many doubts about it as a piece of detailed, convincing research. Not surprisingly, I am less confident about it passing than I did last year, in spite of the fact that it has been much revised and reconceptualised in key areas. I am still unconvinced as to whether I have met the written recommendations of the examiners. I await their verdicts with much trepidation.



## **Professional development**

Over the past eight years I have been working on the Ed.D programme, my professional life has changed considerably and I feel that I have battled consistently to integrate my studies with my practice as a Teacher Educator in a variety of different teaching contexts. On a purely practice level, much of the theory and practice which I have learned through the taught modules and the practical research which I have undertaken has been fed into my teaching and training and proved to be invaluable in working across a variety of HE programmes both in the UK and abroad.

The research which I have undertaken for the IFS and the thesis have given me the confidence to undertake smaller research projects both in my own institution and abroad over the past four years and to present my ideas outside my institution. I have tried to use research to effect practical changes in ways I have never previously considered by presenting my findings at symposia and to senior managers in my work place.

More widely, I believe that my studies have contributed broadly to my understanding of what it means to be a professional teacher and in particular, to define the meaning and the value of my own professional standards and the validity (or otherwise) of what I do as a teacher within the FE sector. If according to G.K. Chesterton, 'the whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land, it is at last to set foot on one's own country as a foreign land', then the learning journey I have undertaken on the course has achieved its purposes.